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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Monday 9 October 2017

HER MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

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OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SEVENTH PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 13 JUNE 2017]

SIXTY-SIXTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 629

FOURTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2017-2019

House of Commons

Monday 9 October 2017

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

WORK AND PENSIONS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Universal Credit

1. **Hywel Williams** (Arfon) (PC): What progress he is making on the roll-out of universal credit. [901031]

5. **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What progress he is making on the roll-out of universal credit. [901036]

9. **Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab): What progress he is making on the roll-out of universal credit. [901041]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mr David Gauke): The roll-out of universal credit is proceeding to plan, gradually and sensibly. People are moving into work faster and staying in work for longer. The most recent phase of expansion will only take the proportion of the forecast claimant population receiving universal credit from 8% currently to 10% by the end of January.

Hywel Williams: There is a great deal of support for the principles of universal credit. However, the roll-out has been characterised as

“operationally messy, socially unfair and unforgiving”.

These are not my words, but those of Sir John Major. If the Secretary of State will not postpone the roll-out—along with many other right hon. and hon. Members, I would like him to consider that again—will he consider two other remedies: to drop the waiting period, and to allow the benefit to be paid fortnightly?

Mr Gauke: Let me be clear: as I touched on earlier, the evidence so far shows that those who go on to universal credit are more likely to be working six months later than they would be had they been on the legacy benefits, and they are also more likely to be progressing in work. That is really important, and it is not something that I want to deny people. I believe that we should roll out something like this gradually and sensibly, and make changes as and when necessary, but that is exactly what we are doing.

Mr Carmichael: Those of us who remember the chaos around the introduction of tax credits can see the good sense in a phased, gradual introduction to universal credit. However, I have to say to the Secretary of State that if we do not learn the lessons from the pilots, we frankly risk losing any advantage that we will gain. Some 57% of applicants for universal credit are having to borrow money before their first payment. Is not that alone enough to justify a pause?

Mr Gauke: The system of advances is an integral part of the system. It has always been there, but we want to make that properly available. Nobody who needs support should have to wait six weeks before they receive any support. What we are doing is making it clear that people can receive an advance of their first month's payment, which is then deducted over the next six-month period. That is helping people deal with cash-flow issues in that first month, which I think is a sensible and pragmatic response.

Mohammad Yasin: A recently bereaved constituent of mine, a working single parent, has seen her income reduced by £300 a month since transferring to universal credit. For her, work does not pay. Will the Secretary of State urgently review the link between agreement to support payments and universal credit, and will he stop the roll-out until he has done so?

Mr Gauke: The hon. Gentleman says that work does not pay. Let us be clear: universal credit always means that it is worth working an extra hour and worth taking a pay rise. It is always worth working more under universal credit, which was not the case with the legacy benefits. That is why the evidence is suggesting that people do work more and do work more hours than they do under the legacy systems.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the reasons why more people have gone out to work this morning than ever before in our nation's history is that we as a Government have not ducked the challenge of welfare reform, we do not let people languish for years on out-of-work benefits, and universal credit is an essential part of the welfare reform programme?

Mr Gauke: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. It has been the consistent policy of this Government—including under my predecessors, such as my right hon. Friend—to ensure that we have a welfare system that puts work at the heart of it. That is one of the reasons why we have record levels of employment, as he so rightly says.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): No. 7, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: No, the hon. Gentleman was standing up on No. 1 and he has a very similar question, so he can unburden himself of his important thoughts now.

7. [901039] **Luke Graham** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): My right hon. Friend is aware that I and many of my Conservative colleagues have pressed him on the issue of providing support for people during the six-week assessment and transition periods for universal credit. Will he confirm that jobcentres in Scotland will proactively offer such advances and support where needed?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend is right to highlight that point. As I said last week, we are refreshing the guidance to DWP staff to ensure that people who need support—who will struggle to get through to the end of the assessment period without financial support—have access to that money quickly. Increasing the eligibility for advance payments is one of the best ways in which we can address some of the concerns that have been raised and learn from that experience.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): Although I believe that advance payments are treating the symptoms rather than the cause, I welcome the Secretary of State's additional guidance to make sure that jobcentres offer them. Advance payments cover roughly two weeks' worth of money: what support is in place for people waiting three, four, five, six or seven weeks?

Mr Gauke: The level of advance payments of 50% is, we believe, the right balance between getting support to people early in the process—they can get it very quickly—and ensuring a reasonable level of deduction for that advance payment in subsequent months. Clearly, this is an issue that we will continue to look at, but 50% strikes the balance. I welcome my hon. Friend's support for that announcement.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Rent arrears, food poverty and in-work poverty have all rocketed in areas where universal credit has been rolled out. The third sector has united to join in our call for universal credit to be halted, and we know that pressure is mounting on the Conservative Back Benches for that to happen. Is not the Secretary of State's apparent climb-down on crisis loans and advance payments an admission that universal credit is failing?

Mr Gauke: Not at all. I come back to the point that universal credit is giving more people the opportunity to get into work and progress in work. The personalised support that is provided by jobcentres where universal credit has been rolled out is proving to be effective. To those people who call on me to stop the process, I say that once fully rolled out, universal credit is likely to mean that 250,000 more people will be in work than would otherwise have been the case. I will not deny those people that opportunity.

Neil Gray: The Secretary of State is either desperately deluded or ignorantly incompetent. In one of the areas in which universal credit has been rolled out, East Lothian Citizens Advice reports that more than half of its clients on universal credit are worse off by an average of £45 a week. The just under a third who are better off have gained just 34p a week. How much more evidence of social destruction will it take for the Secretary of State to have the strength to halt the roll-out?

Mr Gauke: Universal credit is adding to what the Government have already been doing—ensuring that work is at the heart of welfare. That is why we have 3 million more jobs than we did in 2010. Welfare reform is part of the reason for that, and it is part of the reason why we will continue to press on with reforming the welfare state to encourage work and help people to progress in work.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): May I warmly welcome advance payments within five days and immediate needs payments the same day as a definite step forward? Given the reasonably high levels of adult illiteracy and poor computer skills in some areas, can the Secretary of State say something about how volunteers might be able to work alongside personal advisers to help people fill in the application form in the first place?

Mr Gauke: It is important that people filling in forms receive the necessary support, but jobcentre staff provide that support. Voluntary organisations may be able to assist, but Jobcentre Plus staff are already giving the intensive support necessary to help people to complete the applications.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): Given the Secretary of State's confidence in the roll-out of universal credit to another 150 Jobcentres Plus, can he give the House a guarantee that none of our constituents will face hunger or near destitution through lack of money over the Christmas period?

Mr Gauke: Universal credit is about ensuring that our constituents are in a stronger financial position. That is what we are trying to deliver by enabling them to work and providing the support they need. As I said earlier, if we look at where we want to get to by 2022, 8% of claimants are already on universal credit and by January it will be 10%. The process is gradual and measured, and that is enabling us to learn from the experience and make improvements, which we will continue to do all the time.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I support universal credit and its roll-out, but I am concerned about applicants with zero savings who, if they lose money for one or two weeks, have nothing to fall back on. Will the Department consider the possibility of jobcentres writing supportive letters to landlords to explain the situation in which benefit claimants find themselves, because the worst outcome for applicants is that they lose their home?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. There is an obligation on social landlords, given the source of income through universal credit, to work constructively with tenants. If a tenant has a reasonable expectation of receiving housing costs as part of their universal credit payment but has not yet received them, the landlord should not take action and the tenant should not face risk of eviction.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): As we have heard, universal credit is causing debt, rent arrears, and even homelessness up and down the country, with many claimants already in work. Given that housing associations are saying that over 80% of rent arrears are down to UC, and that the Mayor of Greater Manchester is predicting that rough sleeping will double as a result of UC roll-out, how many more families does the Minister estimate will be made homeless this winter as a result of the Government's refusal to pause UC roll-out?

Mr Gauke: Let us be clear: no one needs to go six weeks without financial support when there is a system of advances in place. I make the point to all right hon. and hon. Members that if they are aware of constituents who have not received an advance, they can make it clear to them. Let us be realistic: the fact is that we are now moving towards a welfare system that does not put in place barriers to work and does enable people to make progress. It is no good Labour Members saying they are in favour of the principles, but then trying to obstruct the delivery of a reform that will give 250,000 more people a job.

Investment and Pension Scheme Charges

2. **Kelvin Hopkins** (Luton North) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the level of fees and charges applied to investments and pension schemes by asset managers. [901032]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): The Secretary of State has regular discussions with the Chancellor on a range of issues. The Department has had specific discussions with both the Treasury and the Financial Conduct Authority on the FCA's proposed remedies in this area, and our plans to ensure that details of these costs and charges are published and given to pension scheme members.

Kelvin Hopkins: Is not the reality that for millions of ordinary people the only way to guarantee a sufficient income in retirement is a good state pension together with a state earnings-related pension scheme for all, with defined contributions and defined benefits?

Guy Opperman: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question. He will be aware that auto-enrolment has reversed the decline in work-based pension saving, with 8.5 million people signed up and further progress to be made. The reality is that, by reason of the coalition and this Government, we have a new state pension that is worth £1,250 more than in 2010.

Pension Arrangements for Women

3. **David Hanson** (Delyn) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on improving pension transition arrangements for women born in the 1950s. [901033]

14. **Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on improving pension transition arrangements for women born in the 1950s. [901047]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): The Secretary of State has regular discussions with the Chancellor, but the Government will not be revisiting the state pension age arrangements for women born in the 1950s that are affected by the Pensions Acts of 1995, 2007 and 2011.

David Hanson: My hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) and I, Members of the Minister's own party, and all Opposition parties in this House, including the Democratic Unionist party, have introduced a Bill, to be debated on 27 April, to provide for transitional arrangements to be put in place. Will the Minister support the Bill? If not, will he tell the House why not?

Guy Opperman: I can only repeat the answer I just gave: the Government do not intend to revisit the state pension age arrangements for women born in the 1950s who are affected by the Pensions Acts of 1995, 2007 and 2011. The cost would be in excess of £70 billion.

Patricia Gibson: The Minister will be aware that, following the Brexit vote, bond yields dropped by 30%, increasing the public sector pensions bill by a hefty 30% to £1.8 trillion over the last year. Is this latest example of Government ineptitude the real reason WASPI women are being ignored, penalised and denied their pensions?

Guy Opperman: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her question, but if her Government in Scotland disagree with any aspect of the UK Government's welfare reforms, they have the powers to do something about it. I refer her to the letter of 22 June from Jeane Freeman, my opposite number, which specifically discusses the uses of Scotland Act powers to address individual cases.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Will the Minister clarify whether, if the law on the state pension age were changed to favour women over men, it would be discriminatory or illegal?

Guy Opperman: The reasons for the original changes were the changes in life expectancy and equality law. If the law proposed by Labour were to approach men and women differently, it would—with respect—be highly dubious as a matter of law.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): Will the Minister further clarify that point? Labour says that the previous pension age could come back and that we could return to a situation where men are discriminated against. Does he agree that such discrimination might be profoundly against the law?

Guy Opperman: Those who seek to make the case for such a law would need to satisfy themselves that men would not bring a case against the proposers, because it would unquestionably create a new inequality between men and women.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): The ombudsman's first rulings on whether the Government are guilty of maladministration for failing to give 50s-born women sufficient notice of their earlier retirement age are due soon. Maladministration or not—it will take years to resolve that matter—can I ask the new Minister to take this back, think again, tell us what he is prepared to do, and what research he is prepared to do, to alleviate their misery, and perhaps even consider our proposals on pension credit and allowing them to retire up to two years earlier?

Guy Opperman: The Government strongly believe that there has been no maladministration by the Department for Work and Pensions, including during the 13 years when Labour was in charge of the Department.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Is the new state pension not in fact removing injustices that have persisted for far too long, and are not the main beneficiaries women and low earners?

Guy Opperman: My hon. Friend is correct. The new state pension is much more generous for the many women who were historically worse off under the old system. More than 3 million women stand to gain an average of £550 extra per year by 2030 as a result of these changes.

Employment and Disabled People

4. **Kate Green** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): What progress has been made on increasing the employment rate for disabled people. [901034]

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Penny Mordaunt): The employment rate among disabled people has increased to 49%, and the Government are committed to getting 1 million more disabled people into work over the next 10 years.

Kate Green: In 2015, the Minister said the Government's aim was to halve the disability employment gap by 2020, and in 2016 the Social Market Foundation said that that meant an extra 1.2 million disabled people in employment, but now the Minister tells us that the ambition is for an extra 1 million disabled people in work within 10 years. Why are Ministers becoming less ambitious for disability employment?

Penny Mordaunt: When Labour was in office, it did very well in closing the disability employment gap—by raising the unemployment level among the general population. We will take a different approach. As I have said in this place before, we will look in great detail at the local numbers—for example, the numbers of people with a learning disability coming out of education; that is what we need to get people focused on.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I warmly welcome the latest employment figures, particularly the youth employment figures. We are within touching distance of record youth unemployment. On young disabled people, will the Minister comment on Leonard Cheshire Disability and the great work it does, particularly its Can Do scheme? I think she recently met ambassadors of that scheme.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for allowing me to pay tribute to Leonard Cheshire. It has launched a number of interesting and effective initiatives, which are very much part of our Work and Health programme.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): A constituent suffering from mental health problems who came to my surgery at the weekend has been denied employment and support allowance. Her sister came with her to tell me that my constituent had attempted suicide four days earlier. What is the Department going to do to identify and help vulnerable people like her?

Penny Mordaunt: In recent years the Department has introduced a number of measures to ensure that those who carry out assessments for either personal independence payments or ESA have had training so that they can recognise a mental health condition and flag up that condition or any concerns they may have. However, the work capability assessment itself is not working. It was introduced by the Labour party—[*Interruption*—]with the best intentions, but it has elements that do not work. Given the opportunities that will result from the work and health road map, I hope that Labour will work with us to reform those elements.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I am organising a Disability Confident event in my constituency to try to encourage more employers to take on people with disabilities, and I am grateful to the jobcentre for its support. Would the Minister like to come along so that she can, in person, encourage employees in my constituency to take on more disabled people?

Penny Mordaunt: I congratulate my hon. Friend and other Members on both sides of the House who have run Disability Confident events and signed up employers. Our 5,000th employer has just been signed up. If I cannot attend my hon. Friend's event, I shall be happy to send a video instead.

Mr Speaker: But I am sure that it is a personal ambition of the hon. Lady to go to her hon. Friend's constituency. We look forward to getting an update in due course.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): May I address my question to the Minister who speaks for a party that has been in power for more than seven years? This morning my constituent, Debbie A, came to tell me that she had failed her ESA assessment, first because she had been told that she could hear her name being called from the waiting room, when in fact she had been told that it was being called by her son, who was sitting next to her; and, secondly, because the report had said that she had been hit by a bus, when in fact she had been hit on a bus. Does not the Minister accept that there are profound systemic problems in the assessment process?

Penny Mordaunt: There are things that we can do to improve the assessment process dramatically and also, more critically, to prevent people from having to go through those assessments. The thrust of the health and work consultation paper that we issued this year is to bring about early intervention in healthcare and to use healthcare information to populate the welfare system, and that is what we are trying to do.

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (Saffron Walden) (Con): What steps are the Government taking to use technology to help their equality agenda, specifically in respect of disabilities?

Penny Mordaunt: We have just launched a platform called OpenLab, which brings together those working in technology and disability, and focuses primarily on accessibility issues. It will enable us to publicise problems that we are trying to solve, but will also enable that community to work together to arrive at solutions faster.

Universal Credit

6. **Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): How many new claims for universal credit have been paid on time since its introduction. [901037]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mr David Gauke): Payment in arrears has been in the design of universal credit since 2010, and was implemented by the coalition Government in 2014. Our latest data show that more than 80% of new claimants are being paid in full and on time, which is a significant improvement on the position earlier this year, and that more than 90% receive some payment before the end of their first assessment period.

Kevin Foster: Universal credit is due to be rolled out in Torbay in May 2018. What further assurances can the Secretary of State give that resources will be made

available to ensure that people in my constituency who make claims under the scheme will receive their payments on time?

Mr Gauke: We are ensuring that sufficient resources are available in jobcentres. It is worth pointing out that we have made significant progress on universal credit timeliness this year—as I have mentioned, more than 80% of new claimants received their full payment on time, and more than 90% received part of their payment—and we expect to build on that positive trend. I am sure that my hon. Friend will join me in welcoming universal credit roll-out to Torbay next May.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The problem is that “on time” means after a six-week delay, and that delay, as the Secretary of State knows well, is causing immense hardship up and down the country. Last week I met Maria Amos, who came within an inch of suicide because she had to live literally on nothing but water for six weeks, irreparably damaging her health. The Secretary of State can choose to ignore organisations such as Citizens Advice, but will he at least take some notice when Sir John Major calls for a pause?

Mr Gauke: What I would say—this is exactly the point I made earlier—is that I do not believe that anybody should be left without any support for six weeks when they do not have savings or an alternative source of income, which is why it is important that advances are available within the system. The majority of claimants now make use of advances. We need to ensure that that is properly communicated to claimants. I will certainly do that, as I am sure will all Members of this House.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): My constituency was one of the first to introduce universal credit, and it went on to full service in 2016. Staff in my constituency tell me that they are very familiar with the new system. Does the Secretary of State agree that we need to ensure that what we have learnt from the pathfinder jobcentres is quickly rolled out to those now taking up the new system?

Mr Gauke: We must constantly learn from experience—this is about testing, learning and improving. We must ensure that awareness of the advances system is high, and clearly that has increased in recent months. My hon. Friend makes a point about jobcentre staff, and my experience of meeting such people up and down the country is that they are enthused by what universal credit can do for claimants to help them to get into work.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): Twenty-four per cent. of new universal credit claimants wait longer than six weeks to be paid in full. Only one advance payment is allowed for a new universal credit claim, and the maximum award is 50% of the claimant's estimated benefit, so how will advance payments really prevent families from getting into debt while waiting for their first universal credit payment?

Mr Gauke: The timeliness of payments has improved since the figures that the hon. Lady cites were compiled, and we continue to improve it. As I have said, 90% of claimants receive some support within the six-week period.

Advances are an important part of the system to ensure that people get the support they need. It is incumbent on all of us not to worry people that they will be left without any support whatsoever, but to draw their attention to the fact that they can access funds when they need to—generally waiting no more than five working days or, if necessary, receiving them straight away.

Margaret Greenwood: According to the Trussell Trust, food bank referrals have increased at more than double the national average in areas where the universal credit full service has been rolled out. Does the Secretary of State agree that the social security system should prevent people from having to visit food banks, rather than exacerbating need?

Mr Gauke: We are very keen to ensure that the advances system means that people can access funds so that they do not have to visit food banks. In recent months we have seen an increased use of that system, because we have done more to publicise it, and I want to go further on that. I think that is an important part of a system that, when we step back and look at it, is ensuring that more people are able to work and to progress in work, and that should not be forgotten.

Personal Independence Payments

8. **Neil Coyle** (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): What steps his Department are taking to ensure that personal independence payment assessments are undertaken fairly and efficiently. [901040]

16. **Paula Sherriff** (Dewsbury) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to ensure that personal independence payment assessments are undertaken fairly and efficiently. [901050]

18. **Dr Paul Williams** (Stockton South) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to ensure that personal independence payment assessments are undertaken fairly and efficiently. [901053]

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Penny Mordaunt): We are committed to ensuring that people receive high-quality, fair and accurate assessments. The Department robustly monitors providers' performance and independently audits assessments. Both providers are now increasing clinical support across their centres and providing more personalised coaching for their healthcare professionals.

Neil Coyle: The Department seems to conclude that everything is hunky-dory with PIP assessments, just as it did—erroneously—with work capability assessments. The Disability News Service says it has more than 200 cases of inaccurate PIP assessments, and I have come across plenty in Southwark, including that of my constituent, Tarik Ali. Tarik was assessed as having no evidence of hearing loss, despite being deaf in one ear. He was awarded no points for needing support to manage medication, despite the fact that he sees a GP every three weeks and that his carer manages his medication on a daily basis. There was no mention of Behçet's syndrome in his assessment, despite its having been included in five hospital reports, his GP records and his medication prescription. When will the Minister stop

cutting vital help to genuinely disabled people, stop wasting taxpayers' money on inaccurate assessments and fake mandatory reconsiderations, and finally end the glaring inaccuracies in PIP assessments?

Penny Mordaunt: Currently, 3% of caseload is overturned on appeal, and in the last quarter the number of cases having to go to appeal dropped by 22%. We have introduced changes to get evidence in earlier and to improve the quality of assessments, but we will respond to all the things that Paul Gray has set out in his review this autumn.

Paula Sherriff: Two thirds of disabled people are successful at tribunal when they appeal PIP decisions. Given that the system is so clearly flawed, will the Minister commit to a full overhaul of the assessment process?

Penny Mordaunt: We have opportunities to reduce the burden on individuals going through assessments through what we are trying to do with the work capability assessment and by enabling information used in health care and in ESA assessments to reduce the burden on people getting PIP assessments—and, hopefully, doing away with the volume of assessments that people have. However, I say to the hon. Lady that currently 3% of cases are overturned on appeal. We are doing our best to ensure that the right decision is made earlier, and that seems to be bearing fruit in the numbers of people going to appeal.

Dr Paul Williams: In my experience as a GP, the impact of the conditions of people with anxiety and even agoraphobia is often not adequately assessed within PIP. I welcome the introduction of mental health nurses to the process, but how will the culture of the assessment be changed so that people's physical and mental health capabilities are assessed holistically?

Penny Mordaunt: One of the changes that we have recently made with both providers is that before they turn to the healthcare evidence and the other things that have traditionally formed part of the assessment, they talk with the individual about the impact of the condition on their day-to-day life. That, I think, has improved the assessment dramatically.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): PIP is causing misery for thousands of disabled people. Two disabled people who were in my surgery this Saturday are threatened with destitution because the money that they got as part of their lifetime award under the disability living allowance was stopped following their PIP assessment. The conditions they have had since birth have not and will not change. Why will the Government not exempt people with lifelong or progressive conditions from ongoing PIP assessments, as they are doing with the work capability assessments?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady is right that we have made that change in employment and support allowance. I give her one example: about 84% of people with motor neurone disease are on the highest rates for PIP, but 16% are not. It is therefore perfectly possible that someone will not be receiving the maximum amount of support but that as their condition progresses, they will

need additional support. As I said earlier, we are trying to reduce the burden on individuals going through assessments, but some people will still need to have assessments for PIP because their need becomes greater.

Disabled People: Independent Living

10. **Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): What steps he is taking to support disabled people to live independently. [901042]

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Penny Mordaunt): Supporting someone to live independently is an essential part of enabling that person to pursue their goals, whether they are personal or career goals. Education and independent living support are the two highest priorities for the Office for Disability Issues.

Martyn Day: Every week around 800 Motability vehicles are taken away from disabled people across the UK as a result of the transition to PIP and, according to the most recent DWP statistic on reassessments, 48% of claimants receive a lower level or no award when transferring from DLA to PIP. Does the Minister really believe that taking money away from disabled people on low incomes will help them to live independently?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman will know that in spring we announced changes to Motability to enable people to keep their cars pending appeal. We are looking to make changes to Motability, and I am pleased to say that many in this House have supported the campaign led by Together for Short Lives to extend the Motability scheme to under-threes. We have been in discussions with Motability and the Family Fund about extending Motability to under-threes. Individual constituents will not need to apply; they will be referred by the Family Fund. This is a big step forward in enabling families with small children who have heavy equipment to socialise and go out together.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): My constituent Jacci Woodcock has been campaigning for some time for Dying to Work. She has a terminal illness and was hounded out by her employer. She would like more employers to sign up—employers such as Derbyshire County Council and Rolls-Royce Aero Engines, which have just done so. Will the Minister say what steps she would like to see to ensure that people have more dignity when they have a terminal diagnosis?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for what she has done on the campaign and also Rolls-Royce and her local authority for signing up. I also thank her for bringing Jacci Woodcock to the Department for Work and Pensions to meet me. I think that all Members owe Jacci Woodcock a great debt of gratitude for the campaign that she has run in very trying and difficult circumstances. I have listened to her with great care, and we will take on board her recommendations as part of the health and work road map, which we will publish later this autumn.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): The stress and exhaustion caused to my constituent by the removal of her Motability car led to her losing her professional

post and being redeployed to a role on half the salary. Will the Minister look again at the ridiculous situation whereby the Government are prepared to spend more on Access to Work payments for taxis—in this case nearly £4,500—than on PIP mobility support, which would offer real independence to disabled workers?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady makes a very good point; indeed, we are looking at precisely that. There are lots of pots of money out there—PIP and Access to Work, which she mentioned, are just two—but very little reference between them. We have been working on that and we hope to make some announcements shortly.

Health and Work Programme

12. **Alex Burghart** (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): What progress is being made on the Health and Work programme. [901044]

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Penny Mordaunt): I am pleased to announce to the House that six contracts between the Department and the successful suppliers to the Health and Work Programme were signed on 29 September.

Alex Burghart: It is clear that the Health and Work programme presents an opportunity to bring a lot more disabled people into work. Will the Minister tell the House what requirements are being put on contract providers?

Penny Mordaunt: The key to the programme is that participants will receive much more personalised and tailored support. We need to provide bespoke things to individuals who have complex needs if we want them to be successful. We will be looking for providers to forge links with employers, nationally and locally, but also with health and social care and other local services.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): The Government have backtracked on their commitment to halve the disability employment gap, and the funding for the Work and Health programme will be as little as £130 million a year, which is a fraction of what was set aside for the Work programme. Given the recent report from the UN committee on the rights of persons with disabilities, which condemned the Government's progress, can the Minister advise when they will finally publish their response to the "Work, health and disability" Green Paper? Will the Government respond to the UN's concerns and include high-quality, impairment-specific support, which disabled people have been calling for?

Penny Mordaunt: May I start by welcoming the hon. Lady to her post?

Despite the weeks of the general election, we are still going to meet our original timetable to publish the health and work road map, which will set out in detail not just the Health and Work programme, which is only one small part of what we are planning, but a full comprehensive package to deliver personalised, tailored support for disabled people, support for employers, healthcare reforms and welfare reforms.

The Office for Disability Issues is looking at the UN report; we volunteered to put ourselves through this process, and there is more we can do to lever in some of the things in that report to help achieve some of our ambitions, particularly on accessibility.

Universal Credit

13. **Stephen McPartland** (Stevenage) (Con): Whether he has plans to reduce the taper rate for universal credit claimants. [901045]

The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds): We have already made the taper rate more generous by reducing it from 65% to 63% in April this year, which means that recipients can keep more of every pound they earn.

Stephen McPartland: A taper rate of 63p in the pound is, in effect, a tax rate of 63% on net income. Surely the Minister accepts that that is a punitive rate and a barrier to work.

Damian Hinds: This all has to be seen in the context of our reducing the benefit withdrawal rates and making it more attractive to go into work. Of course I understand the attraction of reducing the taper rate, which is why we have done it, but there is also always a trade-off with costs; reducing the rate from 65% to 63%, as we have done, carries a cost—an investment in the system of £1.8 billion.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): Is not the whole point of a pilot to test a system and then change it before it is rolled out further? Many of my constituents are in the universal credit pilot scheme. Given my caseload from them, I was horrified today to receive letters about all the rest of the jobcentres in my constituency getting universal credit roll-out. This needs to be looked at, along with the taper and many other issues, before it is rolled out further.

Damian Hinds: In days of yore, such big changes used to be done via a big Gantt chart on the wall and then one day things going live. That is not how universal credit has been designed or rolled out; it is a very gradual process and has been being rolled out since 2013. The full service is now in more than 100 jobcentres, and we continue to update, evolve and improve it at every turn.

Mr Speaker: If the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), who has a similar inquiry at Question 17, were standing, I would call him, but if he is not, I will not—

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: He is now, so I will.

17. [901051] **Kevin Hollinrake:** Many of my constituents get paid weekly, and real cash-flow problems can be caused if they move from a weekly payment to a monthly payment cycle. Will the Minister set out what we are doing to help deal with these cash-flow problems? Will we keep these measures under review to make sure we provide a workable solution?

Damian Hinds: Although most people these days are paid monthly, quite a lot of people are still paid weekly. When people move into a new job, they could then be getting paid weekly or monthly. There are two important things to mention here: advances, which have been extensively discussed during today's questions, and the personal budgeting supports we offer to people to help them deal with changes in their cash flow.

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): Universal credit claimants must wait a minimum of six weeks for their first payment, which does not reflect the world of work. Advance payments are not a remedy for that, because they are a loan, entrenching poverty and debt. Is the Department really going to ignore the unanimous plea from support and advice agencies to pause this roll-out?

Damian Hinds: It would be wrong to pause the roll-out, because that would mean fewer people would have the benefit of universal credit, more people would be stuck on 16-hour jobs and fewer people would be able to claim the higher rate of childcare reimbursement. Universal credit is working; we know that people are getting into work quicker and that, once they are there, they can see clearly that working more will always pay.

Personal Independence Payments

15. **Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): If he will take steps to ensure that people applying for personal independence payments are seen by a specialist at their initial assessment. [901048]

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Penny Mordaunt): Personal independence payment assessments require specialist skills, which is why they are undertaken by qualified health professionals, who are experts in disability analysis, and focus on the effects of health conditions and impairments on an individual's daily life.

Ruth Cadbury: That is not the experience of some of my constituents, including one who has a rare condition and is on the highest level of DLA, and so should automatically be entitled to PIP, but whose assessor had no knowledge of the condition and refused the PIP application. Will the Minister specify the exact training, experience and competence requirements an applicant would have to demonstrate to qualify as a healthcare professional who could undertake PIP assessments for the DWP?

Penny Mordaunt: I have stated many times in the House the categories of healthcare professionals who can work as PIP assessors—it is a long list—but I should point out that these people are not carrying out health assessments. They are not there to diagnose; they are there to record the impact of someone's condition on their personal life, which is quite different. As I have said in answer to previous questions, we will introduce some new measures on PIP as part of our response to Paul Gray's second review.

Mr Speaker: We are well out of time, but we will take the last question because I do not want the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) to feel left out. Let us hear him.

Comparative Unemployment Rates

19. **Daniel Kawczynski** (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): What recent comparative assessment he has made of rates of unemployment in the UK and in other European countries. [901054]

The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds): The UK has the joint fourth lowest unemployment rate in the European Union. At 4.3%, UK unemployment is the lowest in 42 years. It is 3.3 percentage points below the EU 28 average and half that of the euro area.

Daniel Kawczynski: Our unemployment rates continue to fall faster than the EU mean. How is universal credit helping that?

Damian Hinds: Universal credit is an absolutely integral part of our overall approach to employment. It not only simplifies the system but makes it easier for people to go into work, because they do not have to think about whether subsequently they might have to restart their benefit claim. Once people are in work, it means that they can make progress more easily because there are none of the cliff edges of the old system.

Topical Questions

T2. [900946] **Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mr David Gauke): We are delivering our promise to reform welfare provision in this country. Universal credit replaces the outdated and complex benefits system of the past, which too often stifled people's potential. Universal credit is a flexible and personalised system that offers unprecedented support. It ensures that people are always better off in work, with payment gradually reducing as earnings increase. It is working: under universal credit, people are moving into work faster and staying in work for longer. We are fully committed to the scheduled roll-out for universal credit full service. It will be expanded throughout the country to the planned timescale, delivering a simpler system that encourages work and supports aspiration.

Tom Pursglove: Several of my constituents have raised with me the importance of ensuring that assessment centres are as accessible as possible. What steps is the Department taking to ensure that, on an ongoing basis, accessibility is checked regularly and improvements are made where necessary?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend makes a good point. DWP officials visit assessment centres to check them against accessibility standards. He flagged up concerns about the parking drop-off points at the Peterborough centre; following his raising of those concerns, improvements have been made.

T7. [900951] **Ellie Reeves** (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Data for my constituency, Lewisham West and Penge, show that the number of claimants aged 50 or older who are seeking work has increased by 15.5% in the past year. In closing Lewisham jobcentre and migrating to a more internet-based system, how exactly

is the Department going to help those with limited access to computers or limited computer literacy, or indeed those who will have difficulties travelling to a jobcentre that is further away?

Mr Gauke: On jobcentres, the Department is sensibly making use of the fact that a contract has ended to make a number of improvements to the service provided. Yes, that does mean that some jobcentres will close, but it also means that the provision of services throughout the country will be done in a modernised and effective way. On employment, the fact is that more people are employed than ever before, including older members of the workforce.

T3. [900947] **Jo Churchill** (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): In the light of the worrying figures, both nationally and for my constituency, will my hon. Friend the Minister outline the steps the Department is taking to reduce the level of personal independence payment reassessments, so that individuals in my constituency can access at the earliest opportunity the benefits that are due to them?

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Penny Mordaunt): We have implemented a wide range of initiatives across the whole claim process, including speeding up the process to clear more claims, increasing the number of healthcare professionals and extending working hours, and making improvements to IT systems.

T9. [900953] **John Mann** (Bassetlaw) (Lab): Universal credit is to be introduced in my constituency on 14 December, which, in my view, is indecent. The introduction should be delayed, as it will be a catastrophe for many children at Christmas. As the Secretary of State believes the opposite, will he accept my offer now of a visit to my constituency the week after its introduction, in the run-up to Christmas, to see whether I am right or he is right and what the impact will be?

Mr Gauke: I visit jobcentres all the time and what I hear is that universal credit is providing a more personalised support that is helping to get more people into work and that it is an important reform. Those who stand in the way of it are failing to help the people who need support.

T4. [900948] **Nicky Morgan** (Loughborough) (Con): I know Ministers take very seriously the responsibility of supporting those with mental ill health to stay in work. One of my constituents has contacted me about his concerns. He is suffering from mental health challenges and is finding that the constant threat of redundancy or reorganisation is taking a toll on his mental health. Can the Minister tell me now, or write to me, to explain what obligations employers have to take into account their employees' mental health when they are making such decisions?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sorry to hear about the experience of my right hon. Friend's constituent. As she will know, the Prime Minister commissioned a review of mental health in the workplace led by Paul Farmer and Dennis Stevenson. Their findings will be reported to this House shortly.

T10. [900954] **Stephen Lloyd** (Eastbourne) (LD): As universal credit comes to Eastbourne, my constituents face the double horror of a 10-week delay for their first payment and no hope of benefit increases in the years ahead. Now that the latest research published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation warns that the benefits freeze will push a further half million people into poverty by 2020, will the Minister commit to lifting the freeze, thus avoiding the severe poverty trap that will affect my constituents and hundreds of thousands of people around the country?

Mr Gauke: The benefits freeze was a measure that this Government took to contribute to reducing the deficit. On the point about people having to wait 10 weeks before receiving universal credit, 80% get paid in full and on time after six weeks. The system of arrears is inherent in universal credit because the payment is based on how much a person has earned over the previous month. That has always been part of the design, and it was part of the design that, presumably, the hon. Gentleman voted for when the coalition Government passed the legislation.

T5. [900949] **Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): The Secretary of State has already made it clear that, when the jobcentre closes in Shipley, outreach work will still be carried out by the jobcentre in the constituency. Can he confirm what he has in mind, when the specific proposals will be announced and what consultation will be carried out in the local community to ensure that they meet the needs of my constituents?

The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds): Outreach is a vital front-facing service to claimants across a whole range of employability and related services. Of course it needs to be tailored to the needs of each area. The DWP is looking at partnerships with organisations in my hon. Friend's constituency, including with the local authority. Throughout the course of that, we will be working with his constituents, and we will be happy to work with him, to ensure that those needs are met following the closure of the Shipley office.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): On 12 July, universal credit was rolled out in York. Many of the families affected also receive free school meals and therefore had a devastating time of food poverty over the summer. Will the Minister learn lessons from the pilot scheme and ensure that universal credit is not rolled out in advance of school holidays?

Mr Gauke: Universal credit was rolled out in 29 jobcentres in July. It is important that we continue to make progress in the roll-out. We are doing it gradually and sensibly, but we are moving towards a system that helps more people get into work. Of course we are constantly learning lessons and finding ways to improve things, but it is a system that is helping to deliver more people into work.

T6. [900950] **Stephen McPartland** (Stevenage) (Con): The higher rate of tax is 45% on gross income and the effective rate of tax on universal credit claimants is 63%. How can the Minister justify that?

Damian Hinds: I return to what I said earlier: with universal credit, we are improving the incentives to work. This has to be seen in the context of the previous

system, where far more people would face considerably higher marginal withdrawal rates. This important reform means that people can always see that they are better off going into work and, once there, they can see that they are better off always progressing in work.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I find the Minister's previous response surprising because a response to a recent written question showed that about two thirds of decisions against awarding PIP and ESA in Barnsley East are eventually overturned on appeal, with these appeals taking an average of 15 weeks to be decided. Does the Minister believe that it is acceptable to make my constituents who are eligible for vital financial assistance wait nearly four extra months?

Penny Mordaunt: No. That is why we are trying to get better decisions earlier in the process. We have made progress. As I said, the number of PIP cases going to appeal has fallen by 22% over the last quarter. We will continue—

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): Will you publish those figures?

Penny Mordaunt: They are published; they were published a few weeks ago. We will shortly bring forward our response to Paul Gray's second review, which will contain further things that I hope the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) will welcome.

T8. [900952] **Matt Warman** (Boston and Skegness) (Con): I recently met the excellent local branch of the charity Scope in Boston. It praised the Government's work on changing the testing regime for those with long-term conditions, but asked what progress are the Government making on their continued bid to simplify the bureaucracy of the forms and the application process for benefits to which people are entitled?

Penny Mordaunt: The severe conditions criteria are a big step forward and will save people from having to go through reassessments. I have already stated that we intend to do more on PIP and the work capability assessment. The severe conditions criteria also allow us to save bureaucracy at local government level. If we can passport that information to local government, it will help with things such as the blue badge scheme and other forms that people have to fill in that are not directly supplied by DWP or the Government.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): I would invite the Employment Minister to visit my local jobcentre, but he is busy circumventing his own criteria to shut it down. In view of the problems with universal credit, why does he not revisit those decisions, keep jobcentres open and stop forcing some of the most vulnerable people to travel for hours just to get the benefits that they are entitled to?

Damian Hinds: We had an estate that was underutilised. As the Secretary of State said, coming to the end of the large contract that covered very much of the estate, there was an opportunity—indeed, a requirement—to review all our needs to ensure that we had the best possible estate for the future. We had clear criteria for determining which of those sites should be open to public consultation. Where those criteria were met, of course there was a consultation.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): I am sure that the Secretary of State and everyone in this House would agree that parents should fulfil their financial obligations to their children. But do they agree that much more should be done to combat those who are shamefully using legal loopholes to avoid paying child maintenance?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Caroline Dinanage): Where a parent fails to pay on time or in full, we aim to take immediate action to recover that debt and to re-establish compliance. Where someone's personal income appears suspicious in any way, caseworkers may refer that case to our newly beefed-up financial investigations unit.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I wrote to the Secretary of State on Friday about my constituent, Danielle Brown, who lost her leg at the age of two. She has now lost her PIP and her Motability car. Will the Minister look into this case and assure me that I will get a reply as soon as possible?

Penny Mordaunt: I would be happy to look at the hon. Lady's case. We changed the rules on Motability to ensure that people could go to appeal and not lose their car in the meantime. It sounds as if something has gone wrong in this particular case. I cannot make a decision, but I can look at the case and see what we can do to help.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I am grateful to the Government for the assistance given to my constituent, who had to leave Dominica because of the terrible damage caused by the hurricane. But on her return back to this country with her 22-month-old son, she has discovered that she is not entitled to any benefits whatever for three months. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how we can ensure that we have a right and proper system to make sure that people in such circumstances really are entitled to benefits?

Mr Gauke: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for raising that point. We will certainly look at it and ensure that she has the opportunity to meet us to discuss it.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): East Lothian is a pilot area for universal credit, and the third sector—particularly the citizens advice bureau and East Lothian's local authority welfare service—has kept universal credit going by supporting a very high percentage of applicants. Will the Minister confirm when there will be additional funding for the third sector, so that it can carry on supporting the DWP with universal credit?

Mr Gauke: We obviously continue to engage with the voluntary sector. I know what the CAB was campaigning for, but it did welcome what I said last week about advances; indeed, I am meeting the CAB later this week to further discuss how we can work together to deliver a very important welfare reform.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): While the increase in advance payments is welcome, does the Secretary of State not share my concern that the CAB has said that, on average, claimants have only less than £4 a month to pay back creditors? Therefore, advance payments are

simply storing up problems for the future. Will he commit to giving the House a statement on the numbers who are coming into universal credit, the time it takes to pay them and the numbers who are forced into debt, rent arrears or hardship because of this policy?

Mr Gauke: We do update the House on information, as we have it, about the number of claimants for universal credit, the timeliness details and other details, and we will continue to do that. When it comes to advances, there is a concern across the House that people are left six weeks without receiving any support. Ensuring that advances are there and that they are made known to people is really important, and I hope all Members will do that.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): A constituent who relies on agency work from the shipyards finds himself in rent arrears of over £900 as a result of being on universal credit. Does that not show that the concerns of social housing providers should be listened to, or does a social housing provider have to go under before its concerns are addressed?

Mr Gauke: The DWP has been working closely with social housing providers on putting in place what is described as the landlord portal, which enables information to flow between social landlords and the DWP. It has already been piloted and will be in operation later this month. That is one of the things we are doing to ensure that this process is constantly improving and that we can verify identity and get the right money to the right people as quickly as possible.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): How much does the Secretary of State estimate is being paid out through housing benefit, or will be paid out under the housing-related costs of universal credit, for unfit accommodation in the private rented sector? All too often, I meet vulnerable tenants living in completely unfit accommodation. A huge amount of taxpayers' money is being used to line the pockets of dodgy landlords. It is a complete and utter disgrace, and I would like to know what the Secretary of State's estimate is of the size of the problem and what he is going to do about it.

Caroline Dinanage: We are always concerned about substandard rental accommodation, and we do keep in touch with the relevant bodies. This is something that is generally of concern to the Department, and it is something we will keep an eye on moving forward.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): The all-party parliamentary group on deafness recently heard compelling evidence about the disproportionate and damaging impact the cap on awards under the Access to Work scheme is having on people who use British sign language as their first language, with deaf people having job offers withdrawn, withdrawing from their roles and giving up on their careers. The Government say they are committed to improving disabled people's opportunities at work, but this policy is destroying them. Will the Minister think again?

Penny Mordaunt: We have looked in great detail at many aspects of Access to Work, and although it is a popular scheme, there are many things we want to change in it. I very much recognise that the scheme is

not just about giving someone a piece of technology to enable them to communicate; it is about giving them the services they need to be their best—to thrive and to be their most creative in the workplace. For some, that will involve British sign language interpreters. This is very much an area we are looking at, and it will be something we bring forward and report back on in the health and work road map.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): Are levels of child poverty falling or rising?

Damian Hinds: When one compares rates of poverty with those before the change of Government in 2010, we see that none of the four main measures has worsened and, in fact, three have improved.

Eleanor Smith (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): As of November 2016, youth unemployment in my constituency of Wolverhampton South West was 27%. Now, we are due to have the roll-out in December and this will see the enforcement of the youth obligation. What steps has the Minister taken to ensure that young people who reside in constituencies such as mine are provided with support into employment, while the transition to the full UC service is implemented?

Damian Hinds: I had the pleasure of visiting Wolverhampton just last week and had the opportunity to speak to my colleagues in jobcentres in the area about youth unemployment. Of course, the figure for young people who have left full-time education and are unemployed has dropped below 5% for the first time since that data series began. As we know about the scarring effect of any period out of work for a young

person, we continue to work hard through things such as work experience and sector-based work academies, and that is showing great success.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. We have run out of time, but I shall call one further questioner, a Member with an insatiable appetite for these matters and a detailed, some would say anorakish, knowledge of all the most complex formulae. I am referring, of course, to the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms).

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I am very grateful, Mr Speaker. Apart from shocking delays, Citizens Advice highlights two big problems with universal credit. One is that it is too complicated; people cannot understand it. The second is that when there is a problem, there is nobody there to help people. I am glad that the Secretary of State is meeting Citizens Advice, but will he have anything to say to them on those two specific problems?

Mr Gauke: The personalised support available in jobcentres to people claiming universal credit is much more advanced than that which we have had in the past. In terms of complexity, universal credit is a much simpler system than that which has existed up to now, with six different benefits, leaving us in the absurd position in which people were unwilling to take a job that required them to work more than 16 hours because they would move from one benefit system to another, knowing that their hours might fall in the future, so they would move back to a different system. That complexity has discouraged people from working more hours and we should all seek to tackle that. That is exactly what universal credit does.

Monarch Airlines

3.42 pm

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling):

With your permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement about the steps the Government have been taking to support those affected by the collapse of Monarch Airlines, in particular the 110,000 passengers left abroad without a flight back to the UK and the almost 2,000 people who have lost their jobs.

This situation is highly regrettable and all parties considered options to avoid the collapse of the company. Ultimately, however, Monarch's board took the decision to place it into administration and it ceased trading at around 4 am on Monday 2 October. The engineering arm of the group remains a viable business and continues to trade. Ahead of the collapse, my Department had been working closely with the Civil Aviation Authority and several Departments across Whitehall to prepare contingency plans, and the response since last week has been swift and substantial.

To put the situation into context, this operation is the largest of its kind ever undertaken. The CAA has essentially set up one of the UK's largest airlines to conduct it. Let me give Members a sense of the scale. We have put arrangements in place to bring back 110,000 people to the UK, with 700 flights over a two-week period. We have had a maximum of 35 aircraft in operation at any one time. The CAA is working to secure planes from 27 different airlines. More than 200 CAA staff are working on the project with thousands more in partner organisations taking part. There are 40 airports involved in the UK, around the Mediterranean and beyond. That has required 267 coaches carrying more than 13,000 passengers, and so far there have been more than 39,000 calls to our customer service centres, all swiftly answered by more than 250 call centre staff. There have been more than 1 million unique visitors to a dedicated website—monarch.caa.co.uk—and 7 million page views. Furthermore, more than 1 million people have been reached through our Facebook promotion. Ten Government Departments and agencies have been involved, including the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in London and our extensive diplomatic and consular network in the affected countries.

I have seen at first hand the work being done across Government and the CAA to make this operation a success. I have spoken to some of the passengers who have returned to the UK on Government flights. I have been hugely impressed by what I have seen, and we have had a very strong, supportive response from the passengers affected, many of whom deservedly praised the CAA and all the Departments involved in this enormous operation.

Normally, the CAA's responsibility for bringing passengers back would extend only to customers whose trips are covered by the air travel organisers' licence scheme, but this is the largest airline failure in UK history and there would have been insufficient capacity in the commercial aviation market to enable passengers to get home on other airlines. The danger was that tens of thousands of passengers abroad would have no easy means of returning to the UK. That is why I instructed the CAA to ensure that all those abroad were offered an alternative flight home. As of last night, around

80,000 passengers had returned to the UK; that is almost three quarters of the total number who were abroad at the time of the collapse. We have had teams of Government officials at overseas airports providing advice and assistance to passengers.

Despite those robust plans and the smoothness of the operation so far, the situation is hugely distressing for all concerned. Obviously, it has been a priority to get people back to the UK, and our hearts go out to those who have lost bookings as a result of the collapse, but in addition to supporting passengers we have been focused on working to ensure that the almost 2,000 former Monarch employees receive the support they need. I am pleased to report that airlines have already directly appealed to those former employees. For example, Virgin Atlantic is offering a fast-track recruitment process for cabin crew and pilots, and easyJet has invited applications for 500 cabin crew vacancies. I and members of my team spoke to the airlines when it became clear what was happening to try to secure their help in getting those opportunities for staff, and I am pleased to see that coming to fruition. easyJet is also calling for direct-entry captains or first officers who meet captain qualifications.

All former Monarch employees will have received information from Jobcentre Plus outlining the support available to them. In total, Jobcentre Plus has pulled together a list of more than 6,300 vacancies across the major UK-based airlines—that is more than three times the number of people being made redundant—which I hope will help those former employees to remain in the airline business. The Minister with responsibility for aviation has been in contact with Members whose constituencies have been hardest hit by these job losses. They have our assurance that we will work with them and the industry to offer what support we can.

I am also aware of the Government's duty to the taxpayer. Although affected passengers have been told they will not have to pay to be flown back to the UK, we have entered into discussions with several third parties with the aim of recovering the costs of the operation. The ATOL scheme of course provides financial cover for those with ATOL protection. We are currently engaged in constructive discussions with the relevant credit and debit card providers so that we can recoup from them some of the cost to taxpayers of the repatriation flights. We are having similar discussions with other travel providers through which passengers may have booked a Monarch holiday, and I thank all those with whom we have held discussions for their constructive and realistic approach.

The initial response to this unprecedented situation would not have been so successful without the support and co-operation of many players. I am sure we would all say that the loss of a major British brand that was close to celebrating its half-century is a really sad moment. However, it should not be seen as a reflection on the general health of the UK aviation sector, which continues to thrive. We have never had the collapse of an airline or holiday company on this scale before, and we have responded swiftly and decisively.

Of course, right now our efforts are rightly focused on getting employees into new jobs and getting passengers home. After that, our effort will turn to working through any reforms necessary to ensure that passengers do not find themselves in this position again. We need to look at all the options—not just ATOL, but whether it is

[Chris Grayling]

possible to enable airlines to wind down in an orderly manner and look after their customers themselves, without the need for the Government to step in. We will be putting a lot of effort into that in the months ahead. Our prime task has been to get people home, and I am immensely grateful to all who have taken part in what has proved, so far, to be a smooth and successful operation.

3.49 pm

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

Britain's fifth largest airline, Monarch, collapsed because of a litany of failures by the Government, the regulator and the company's financial backers and advisers. Its demise must also be seen in the context of a ferociously competitive aviation sector, which is adjusting to major overcapacity problems and the loss of services because of terrorism. A further backdrop to the industry is the foggy skies of Brexit, and the total lack of certainty from this Government for the British aviation industry after March 2019.

The airline's bankruptcy has left huge losses on the shoulders of the public, rather than of the parent company or the regulator. It is the staff, customers, the taxpayer and pensioners who will pay the price. Creditor bills include the £60 million paid by the Government to repatriate holidaymakers, not forgetting the £26 million paid last year when Monarch previously came close to collapse; the £7.5 million to the Pension Protection Fund; the 45 days' pay owed to the 2,000 staff who were made redundant; and the ticket refunds for the 750,000 outstanding bookings at the time of the collapse.

Why did the Government not do more to support Monarch and ensure that the company was viable, if only for the short term? The German Government recently stepped in to assist Air Berlin and the Italian Government have supported Alitalia. At the very least, an orderly wind-down of the airline would have been preferable to sudden administration.

Monarch is reported to have had £50 million in the bank. Why was the airline not granted a short-term ATOL licence extension, which would have allowed it to continue trading and at least bring its passengers back? Who decided not to grant Monarch an ATOL licence extension? More time would have allowed Monarch to be sold in parts. For example, Monarch's landing slots are reported to be worth £60 million. Such assets could have been realised in an orderly wind-down. Instead, moneys from the sale of these assets will go to the secured creditor and former owner Greybull Capital, while the public purse gets nothing.

The statutory role of the CAA is to provide choice and value for money for passengers. British consumers now have one less airline to choose from. On its watch, there has been a surge in the cost of UK air fares following Ryanair's cancellation of flights last month. Monarch's demise will only push up flight costs further. There is an estimated £200 million in the CAA-administered ATOL compensation fund, yet it only covers about one in 20 of Monarch's customers. Why is the public purse paying while the outdated ATOL pot sits largely untouched? Monarch Airlines continued to sell flights until Sunday

1 October, even though the airline knew it was going into administration the following day. Why did the CAA not act to stop that?

Greybull Capital's takeover of Monarch in 2014 was the beginning of the end for the airline. Greybull is a private investment firm that has already presided over the collapse of My Local convenience stores and Comet, among others. Serious questions must now be asked about the conduct of firms such as Greybull, the way they invest and their wider stewardship.

A report in yesterday's edition of *The Sunday Times* suggested that the £165 million rescue package for Monarch last year was largely funded by Boeing, as part of a cut-price deal for an order of 737 aircraft. What is the Secretary of State's assessment of the role of Boeing in the financial engineering of Monarch? The Prime Minister recently criticised the conduct of Boeing against Bombardier in Belfast, in support of her Democratic Unionist party allies. Why is there no criticism of Boeing's role in the loss of 2,000 jobs in Luton?

The role of KPMG must also be called into question. The firm was appointed to seek buyers for Monarch's short-haul business prior to its collapse. It was actively doing so. Why is the same firm now acting as Monarch's administrator? Does the Secretary of State agree with me that that is a glaring conflict of interest?

Finally, the way in which Monarch met its demise should set alarm bells ringing, so will the Secretary of State confirm that there will be a full investigation into the concerns that have been raised?

Chris Grayling: I am sorry the hon. Gentleman did not have a good word to say for all the efforts put in place to bring people back. I would just remind him that, interestingly, in 2008—the last time we had an aviation failure in this country, Excel Airways—the Labour Government followed a very similar path to the one we have followed, with taxpayer-funded repatriation. They did the right thing then, and we are doing the right thing now. I am simply sorry that Labour Members have forgotten that they did the right thing in government, and cannot now say that our doing the right thing this time is indeed the right thing to do. *[Interruption.]* They did the right thing then, and we are doing the right thing now, and I am just sorry that he could not say a good word about those involved.

The hon. Gentleman talked about the reasons for the collapse. First, this is not an issue about Brexit. The airline had been struggling for three years, and the first concerns were raised about it long before the referendum was even held.

I had hoped that this summer, after the rescue package last year, the airline would see its way through. As its chief executive said, it has been a victim of the anxieties about tourism in the east Mediterranean for security reasons. Those have led to a concentration of business in the west Mediterranean and the traditional resorts of Spain and Portugal and a price war from which the company was ill equipped to recover. That is what has happened, no more no less.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the licence, and there was no issue about its renewal. What happened was never about the renewal of the licence—the business had simply reached the end of the road. Its board came to the conclusion that it could not carry on.

The hon. Gentleman asked why the company carried on selling tickets the day before. The reality is that any airline that runs into difficulties will carry on selling tickets until it can no longer do so. The moment it stops doing so, it collapses, and that is what happened. It would happen any time an airline ran into such difficulties. There is no other way to do it. The moment it stops selling tickets, it stops doing business, and that is precisely what happened.

The hon. Gentleman talked about competition, and other airlines are already stepping into the breach. Jet2, one of our fast-growing, emerging airlines, has already said that it will step in and run some of the routes. That is what a market does. If one business fails, others step in. The tragedy of the Labour party in the last few years is that it has moved away from understanding markets to being utterly hostile to markets and the private sector.

We have a thriving aviation sector with competition between airlines delivering a good deal for consumers, and occasionally—once under a Labour Government and once under ours—something has gone wrong. In both of those situations, the Government of the day stepped in to try to make sure that we looked after the travelling public. I have no doubt that if it ever happens again, someone will do the same.

We do have to learn the lessons. We have to understand whether we can make sensible changes to the laws to ensure that this does not happen again. We are already legislating to extend the ATOL scheme to provide better protection for people who book over the internet in a different way from how they have in the past. I am clear that the job of the Government is to look after the travelling public and step in when things go wrong. We have done that, and we are seeking to get back as much money as possible, as Labour did in 2008. Above all, our job is to do our best for the travelling public and the employees. That is what we are doing. I am proud of what we are doing, and I am just disappointed that the Opposition cannot even say well done to the people who have worked so hard in support.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): The chief executive of Monarch has attributed the principal reason for the demise of the airline to terrorism and the resulting flight bans to both Tunisia and Sharm El Sheikh. Can the Secretary of State give his assessment of the merits of that argument?

Chris Grayling: There is no doubt that that was a significant factor, and not only because of changes in consumer patterns. Many other airlines chose to concentrate their resources this summer in the traditional resorts of Spain and Portugal. Alicante airport and others were full of planes this summer, and Monarch got squeezed out in a price war for which it was not financially strong enough. Ironically, it carried more passengers than two years ago, but with far lower revenues, and that more than anything else is what has caused its demise. It is a consequence of the security situation and of people taking a cautious approach to their holidays.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The sad fate of Monarch Airlines is a stark example of the realities of Brexit beginning to bite. There is no denying that the fall in the pound has led to significant increases in the operating costs for the airline over the

past year. The weak pound has also affected consumers and led to a drop in bookings. Add to that the uncertainties over the future of British carriers in Europe that served as a significant deterrent for any potential buyer who might otherwise have been found, and Monarch's fate was sealed. Does the Secretary of State agree that as long as uncertainties over Brexit continue there is a danger of similar high-profile collapses?

Can the Secretary of State say with certainty today that the rights of UK passengers will not be eroded or diluted after Brexit? Will he confirm that the Government will work with administrators and the unions to ensure that employee rights are fully respected during the process, and that—where applicable—compensation is made available in a timely manner, in view of the fact that the manner of the administration raises real concerns about employee rights?

Chris Grayling: I am really sorry the hon. Lady has taken that approach. Let me be absolutely clear: this airline did not fail because of Brexit; this airline failed because it had a business model that was not capable of dealing with a price war in the Mediterranean. That is the reality of the situation and that is what its chief executive said. The hon. Lady talks about Brexit causing a lack of investment, but in the past few weeks we have seen a big expansion. Jet2 has set up a new base at Stansted and there has been a huge investment in the UK by Norwegian, which is becoming a real player in the low-cost marketplace. The market is changing and sadly Monarch, a business that has been around for 50 years, was not able to adapt to those changes. I am afraid she is just doing a disservice to the economy of the United Kingdom when she claims that this was a consequence of Brexit. She talks about employees. The biggest favour we can do for the employees of Monarch is to work to ensure they get another job quickly, and that is what we are seeking to do.

Ms Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): Following on from the many letters I have received from constituents, will the Secretary of State join me in thanking and congratulating the staff of the CAA, the Department for Transport and my local airport, Manchester airport, on the work they have done on the biggest evacuation in peacetime?

Chris Grayling: I am very happy to do that. I pay tribute to the staff of Manchester airport—I met the first plane back at Manchester airport—who rowed in behind the challenge. They were notified only late on the previous day, but by Monday morning staff were out greeting passengers, telling them what had happened and sorting out all the issues arising from the administration. I owe a big debt of gratitude to the staff of Manchester airport, Gatwick airport, Birmingham airport, Luton airport and Leeds Bradford airport, all of whom rose to the occasion, and to all the other people and organisations involved in the exercise.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): In 2014, the CAA recognised the fragility of Monarch's finances and insisted on ATOL protection of flight-only bookings, but that requirement was dropped in December 2016. Monarch's administrators cite cost pressures and increasingly competitive market conditions as contributors to its collapse. Given that the fall in the value of the pound and the loss of tourism in Egypt and Tunisia

[Lilian Greenwood]

predate that decision, passengers will rightly ask why the requirement for ATOL protection was removed. Will the Secretary of State explain the process for deciding to drop ATOL protection of flights, the Department's part in that decision, and how much the decision will ultimately cost UK taxpayers?

Chris Grayling: The ATOL scheme counts as public expenditure whatever happens. The impact on public finances, whether or not this was covered entirely by the ATOL scheme, remains the same because of how Government accounting works. I take advice from the CAA on the steps we need to take. Last year, Monarch had a big injection of cash, and in the first part of this year it looked like things were back on the straight and narrow. What changed this summer was the price war, which undermined the company's revenues and led to a position where its losses were mounting week by week. That was the real issue. I have no doubt that the hon. Lady and her Committee will want to deal with these matters in greater detail, and I look forward to talking to her. She has every right to scrutinise what we have done. We sought to do our best for the travelling public and to take the decisions we were advised to take at the right time.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): As a former Business Minister before the EU referendum, and apparently as one of the chief "remoaners", may I make it absolutely clear that the unfortunate demise of Monarch has absolutely nothing to do with Brexit? Those who seek to make it an issue based on Brexit do not do anybody any favours. I commend the Secretary of State not only for his statement but for his hard work and that of his Ministers in doing their utmost to bring everybody back to this country. Will he confirm that Transport Ministers and Business Ministers have been doing their absolute best for Monarch for years? Will he continue to work with Foreign and Commonwealth Office Ministers to look at how we can open up airports, such as Sharm El Sheik and those in Tunisia, to support the rest of our aviation industry?

Chris Grayling: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend for her words. She is absolutely right. This is a sad tale of an airline that has been struggling for years. A lot of effort has been put in by many people to try to keep it afloat. It is a real disappointment that they were not able to succeed. She is absolutely right about the Brexit issue. If we want another example, it is only a few weeks since Air France and KLM spent hundreds of millions of pounds on a stake in Virgin Atlantic. Those are not the actions of commercial organisations that believe that Brexit is destroying the British aviation sector. Those who suggest it are simply talking down our country and that is not acceptable. I am therefore very grateful to her for what she says. She is absolutely right. I give her an assurance that the Government will do everything we can to support the sector, to support the people who lost out as a result of Monarch's collapse, and to continue to ensure we have a strong sector for the future.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): As the MP for Luton North, I represent many of those who have lost their jobs, and I have to say that, had the company been

in public ownership—with proper transparency and accountability to Parliament—I suspect that this would not have happened. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order.

Kelvin Hopkins: My concern is that, when the company collapsed, the assets had almost all disappeared, so there was very little financial value in the assets of the company. Was this to benefit shareholders and owners, and how much money has the state effectively paid out that the owners and shareholders should have been accountable for?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman is right that the airline did not have the assets at the end—airlines today do not own their planes but lease them. One reason it is difficult to continue to operate an airline like this is that the planes are the property of the lease companies, which take them back immediately afterwards. We clearly have to look at whether there is a better way of doing things, but it is not easy.

It would be relatively easy for an airline abroad that is owed money simply to impound an airliner and make it impossible for us to get people back, so these are not straightforward issues. But is the hon. Gentleman really suggesting that we go back to a time when the state owned everything? Do we want the state to own British Airways, easyJet, Jet2 and Thomas Cook? It is nonsense. Even the most socialist Labour Government of the past would never have suggested that the state own every holiday airline. It is a sign of how extreme its policies have become that anybody on its Benches can seriously suggest it.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I congratulate the Government on the speedy response to the Monarch situation and on highlighting the resilience of the UK aviation industry—in the private sector—but the Secretary of State will be aware that there has been confusion over who is ATOL protected. Does he agree that more could be done to communicate the benefits of ATOL membership?

Chris Grayling: This is definitely one area we need to look at again. We are already legislating to ensure that people who pay for a flight and hotel separately through an internet organisation can be covered through ATOL insurance. This is an area where we have to do more work. There is, however, a fundamental issue: if we were to put a levy on the cost of an air ticket, we would have to do it on every air ticket in the UK, but many of us on the Conservative Benches get regular representations from regional airports, for example, saying they want air passenger duty cut. This would increase APD, and that is why it is not a straightforward decision, but one we must consider very carefully.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): I agree with the Secretary of State that in future situations like this one the Government should look for an orderly wind down, but is that not pie in the sky given the evidence of a conspiracy between Greybull and Boeing to protect their own capital interests against the pension rights of former employees and the people who bought tickets when it was already clear that the airline was bankrupt?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman should remember that the pension scheme was transferred to the Pension Protection Fund in 2014, when it was sold by the Swiss family that had owned the business since the 1960s, so it is not straightforward to talk about pension rights now. He should not second guess any details of how, why or where the financing package was secured a year ago. It is a matter of record that it involved rescheduling or reorganising the leasing of the aircraft, but had it been able to secure the future of the airline, as we all hoped at the time, we would all be grateful it had happened. It is tragic that that was not the case.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): Almost 500 Monarch staff are based at Manchester airport, and many are my constituents, so I am grateful to hear the assurances that the Government will work with the industry to support staff back into work. Will the Secretary of State outline what more support will be given to our regional jobcentres to assist my constituents who have lost their Monarch jobs?

Chris Grayling: Before it became clear that the collapse was happening, we had pre-meetings across Whitehall between the Departments that needed to be involved, including the Department for Work and Pensions, and Jobcentre Plus has been working with all those affected. That work will continue where necessary. I am glad that if such terribly difficult circumstances had to arise, they arose in a thriving sector with lots of job opportunities. The fact that Jobcentre Plus was able quickly to identify more than 6,000 vacancies for 1,700 people looking for jobs is a good step in the right direction and a tribute to the success of that sector, off the back of what has been a successful economy in recent years.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): Four hundred employees, including skilled engineering workers, are set to lose their jobs at Birmingham airport. The region can ill afford to lose those skills and the contribution that they make to the regional economy. Will the Secretary of State ensure that his Department redoubles its efforts, and does everything possible to ensure that those people can find equally skilled work elsewhere in the region as soon as possible?

Chris Grayling: I absolutely give the hon. Gentleman that assurance. Securing strong futures for those people has been, and will remain a priority for us, along with getting the passengers back. As I have said, however, I am encouraged by the number of other airlines that are actively seeking to recruit. As slots become vacant at Birmingham, Luton, Gatwick, Leeds and Manchester, other airlines are already seeking to move in and take those slots, and they will need staff to work on the business as they arrive.

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): Will the Secretary of State give further details of what the Government are doing to assist former employees of Monarch Airlines who have lost their jobs as a result of the airline's collapse?

Chris Grayling: We have had a very early promise on a lot of things. A few hours before the administration came into effect, I spoke to the chief executive of easyJet, who was very helpful. I should express thanks

to easyJet for helping us with some problematic routes; for instance, only specialised pilots can fly into or out of Funchal airport.

The chief executive gave me an assurance, and easyJet has given us assurances subsequently, that the airline will hire a substantial proportion of those staff. It is likely to hire 500 very quickly to meet its future demands, because its business is growing rapidly, and I know that other airlines plan to step in and do the same. Jobcentre Plus has already been holding job fairs and airlines have already been going through recruitment exercises, so it is my hope that all those affected will find jobs quickly.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): The Secretary of State emphasised that Monarch passengers abroad would be covered until 15 October, but constituents of mine who are due to return on 16 October are worried because there is no information available online. Will the Secretary of State please let me know where they can obtain information, and whether their return is protected or not?

Chris Grayling: The full repatriation exercise lasts for two weeks, and at the end of that time there will be a very small number of people left abroad. We know that, at that point, the sector as a whole will be able to absorb those passengers; it could not have done so a week ago, given the numbers involved. The Civil Aviation Authority will be contacting those people this week and keep its helpline available for a considerable time after the repatriation effort has been completed, and we will work to ensure that they can return home straightforwardly. They will be entitled to refunds through credit cards, through the ATOL scheme, and so forth. The crucial difference is that when the company went into administration the sector could not have coped with the number of people involved, but by next week absorbing the small number of passengers who remain will not be a problem.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): Jobs and opportunities that come from access to regional airports and flights mean a lot to Members in all parts of the House, and, indeed, to my constituents who can access Southampton airport. Will the Secretary of State thank Barclays for supporting my constituents and their families? Members of the Hamble Aquatics Swim Team who were due to go to Lanzarote were reimbursed more than £9,000 so that they could train for county, national and regional championships. Their head coach, Amy Rodger, ensured that more than 20 swimmers and their coaches were able to get over there by working with local television stations and Barclays. Will the Secretary of State also thank the many other companies that have done so much to help our constituents?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend's words speak for themselves. I am very grateful to Barclays for providing that help, and I know that a number of other businesses have done the same. The credit card companies in particular have been very constructive in their dialogue about sharing the cost of the repatriation with us, and Lloyds was especially good at getting out of the traps and working with us. I think that this was a moment when corporate Britain behaved in the right way, and worked alongside us to do the right thing.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Having spent five years working for the Association of British Travel Agents and lobbying for greater holiday protection, may I extend my thanks to the people working hard for that and ask the Secretary of State to extend it to travel agents and tour operators? What hit does he expect the Air Travel Trust fund to take as a result of Monarch's collapse, and can he give an assurance that the ATOL protection contribution will not go up, which would mean holidaymakers having to pay more in future?

Chris Grayling: We will not know exactly how much until we have gone through the numbers in detail with the administrator. We do know that only a relatively small proportion of Monarch customers were ATOL protected, because the nature of the business was mostly flight-only. I will happily inform the House once we have gone through all the details, which will take a bit of time, but it will not be a substantial proportion of the total, because of the small proportion of customers who are covered.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to Gatwick-based airlines such as easyJet and Virgin Atlantic for stepping up and offering alternative employment to Monarch employees who now find themselves out of work?

Chris Grayling: I am very grateful to the airlines for the way they have responded, and they have done so in a variety of ways. It was a real team effort at Gatwick, with airline staff, airport staff and others coming together to deal with the immediate issues for passengers, and then really working to get Monarch employees sorted out as quickly as possible. I am very grateful to the staff at Gatwick, as I am to those at all the five airports affected.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Secretary of State said in his statement that the collapse of Monarch Airlines was deeply regrettable, so I wonder whether he will support the call by the pilots' union for a probe into what exactly happened around the collapse.

Chris Grayling: I suspect that there will be exactly such a probe, but I also suspect that it will be led by the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) and her Transport Committee. I do not want to gainsay what the Committee will do, but I would expect a rigorous inquiry, and my Department and the CAA will be very happy to co-operate with it.

Mr Speaker: James Gray.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): Yes, Mr Speaker. I join my friends in congratulating the Secretary of State, the CAA and others on a magnificent operation to repatriate so many people who would otherwise be marooned overseas. However, I remain concerned, because I have a number of constituents who had booked holidays but not yet travelled. Will they be covered under the ATOL scheme, or under credit card insurance schemes, and how many people have been affected in that way?

Mr Speaker: That was a very speedy recovery from the intoxicating effects of conversation with the right hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson), and a very useful guide to new Members on how to perform at a moment's notice in the way that the hon. Gentleman has done. He did signal earlier that he wished to be called, so I was not picking on him.

Chris Grayling: Of all those involved, I feel most deeply for those who made bookings but have now lost trips and holidays. I very much hope that we can get Monarch staff into employment quickly. I hope that we can get all the passengers back safely and well. For those who have lost bookings, it is a deeply traumatic time, and we heard some very sad stories last week. Anyone who booked with ATOL protection or who booked using a credit or debit card will be able to get a refund. My advice to anyone in that position is always to ensure that they have at least one of those cover options available in case something like this happens again—let us keep our fingers crossed that it does not for a very long time.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Monarch has failed to consult its 1,800 employees on redundancy. What estimate has the Secretary of State made of the costs of compensation for those affected workers?

Chris Grayling: As the hon. Lady will know, there are statutory provisions for when businesses go into administration, because they tend not to be able to consult employees about redundancy. It falls to us to try to sort them out, and that is what we will seek to do. There are statutory provisions for compensation for people in these circumstances, but my hope is that the financial impact on them will be limited, given the number of companies looking to recruit as quickly as possible.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): Although the distance between Stansted, my local regional airport, and Luton, which is Monarch's home airport, is relatively small, some people will be displaced much further afield. What plans has the Department put in place to ensure that those who are displaced during the recovery phase can get back to their most local home airport?

Chris Grayling: That will become a particular issue this week. We have brought 80,000 people back, but there are still about 30,000 left. We have emptier planes this week and greater consolidation of planes. We have 747s operating, and clearly a 747 replacing a short-haul Monarch aircraft leaves a gap for seats, so we are bringing flights together and more people will arrive back at a different airport. There will be a coach waiting for them that will take them straight back to their original airport, and the airports are making special arrangements on carpark access and fees to ensure that people do not lose out as a result. The CAA is managing a big bus operation and those people will get back to the place where they started.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Actually, the fall in the value of the pound was a factor in the collapse, although I agree with the Secretary of State that another factor was the UK ban on flights to Sharm el-Sheikh. Since that ban was introduced, the Egyptian authorities,

with UK support, have gone to enormous lengths to improve security at that airport. I believe that every other western country has now lifted its ban. Could we now lift ours before even more people lose their jobs?

Chris Grayling: The right hon. Gentleman will know from his experience in Government that we take security issues very seriously. We have looked exhaustively at the issues around Sharm el-Sheikh. We have not yet taken the decision to resume flying there. I would love us to be able to take it, but we have to be mindful of the security concerns and the risks to the travelling public of the United Kingdom. I assure the right hon. Gentleman that as soon as we feel that we can take that step, we will. We hold back only for good security reasons.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): This has been a massive exercise in repatriating citizens and our thanks should go to the Civil Aviation Authority and others that made it happen. Will the Secretary of State please confirm the cost of the repatriation exercise? Are insurers, credit card companies and banks playing their part in reimbursing the taxpayer?

Chris Grayling: We expect the total gross costs of the repatriation to be around £60 million. We will recover money from all those different groups, and I will in due course be able to tell the House exactly how much the taxpayer has contributed. However, my hon. Friend can be reassured that we are very focused on making sure that there is clear burden sharing, and that it is not only the taxpayer who pays.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): I applaud the Government's efforts in bringing back passengers who were not protected by ATOL. In the modern era of mass travel by air, would it not be sensible to look at legislation around ATOL and cover both hotels and air fares in case something similar happens in future?

Chris Grayling: That will clearly be debated again and has been considered before. The issue is that we would have to apply a levy to every single air fare sold in the UK, whether for a UK airline or otherwise. We could not simply apply a charge to a UK-based airline for which we were responsible—we would have to charge Ryanair, Air France and Emirates passengers as well. Effectively, we would be putting up air passenger duty. I am not saying that we should not do that, but if we were to we would need to use great thought and care beforehand.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): My constituents in Redditch are incredibly hard working—thanks, no doubt, to the Government's amazing record of job creation. However, they look forward to their well-deserved holidays, and price competition has contributed to their being able to take those breaks. Will the Secretary of State confirm that he sees no risks in the airline market that he ought to be considering?

Chris Grayling: That concern has been raised by the Opposition as well. The first thing to say is that our aviation sector is very strong. If people visit our airports, as I do, they will find that virtually every one will say that this has been a record year in terms of the number of passengers carried and that there have been record

days in their history. Passengers are not stopping flying—more and more passengers are flying, and I am confident that that will continue.

I am also confident that we have good airlines that are growing fast: look at the success of easyJet and Jet2. Tour operators are also doing well. I am confident that the sector will grow and develop; there is demand for slots and runway space and there are acquisitions and new investments in new centres such as Jet2's investment in Stansted. We should be confident about the sector. We can never rule out problems in the future or be certain that no airline will ever run into difficulties again. That is why we have to think through whether we need to take steps to make sure that there is proper protection for consumers. But we should be confident in our sector.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend, his Department and the CAA for delivering the largest ever peacetime repatriation. As he will be aware, the UK insolvency framework does not allow insolvent airlines to continue flying, unlike what happened with Alitalia in Italy and Air Berlin in Germany. Will my right hon. Friend consider looking at the insolvency framework again in that light?

Chris Grayling: We will certainly give some thought to that. It is very noticeable that other airlines have been able to carry on flying in administration. The risk, of course, is that an aircraft could easily be impounded by an international airline. One of the reasons we sought to hire our own fleet was to remove that risk. If we had used the Monarch planes, there was a danger that, if they arrived at an airport and a local creditor decided to take action, the plane might have been unable to return. That is something we always need to weigh in the balance. We need to look at what happened with Air Berlin and Alitalia and see whether there are lessons to be learned, but first and foremost our task should always be to protect passengers whose journeys might otherwise be at risk.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): Price wars, stiff competition and a change in travel habits all contributed to Monarch's failure. My constituents in Wealden have been in touch about their holidays and business trips being ruined. Can the Secretary of State confirm that he and his ministerial colleagues have visited returning passengers at UK airports and say what feedback he has received?

Chris Grayling: I met the first flight back at Manchester airport last Monday and my noble Friend Lord Callanan visited Leeds Bradford airport on the same day to meet people coming back. I have had a lot of letters from people who were able to travel back on the repatriation flights saying how grateful they were and how smooth it had been. There are bound to be some hiccups on the way—we had weather problems in Funchal, which led to some cancellations—but in overall terms this has been a very smooth effort and a great tribute to a team of people in the CAA who are not airline specialists, but who have come together to run an airline in a way that was, frankly, enormously impressive.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con)
rose—

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Speaker: I do not think the hon. Gentleman realised how popular he was—and I do not think anyone else did either.

Andrew Bridgen: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Does the Secretary of State agree that, although every lost job is a human tragedy, the British aviation industry remains robust and resilient? I am reminded of 2012, when British Midland International collapsed, with the loss of 1,200 jobs at East Midlands airport in my constituency. These are very highly skilled people who are quickly absorbed back into the economy. Unemployment in North West Leicestershire remains at a record low of 1%.

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I am delighted that we have a thriving sector, with more than 6,000 vacancies, for which the 1,800 people who have lost their jobs can apply. I am also delighted by the fact that easyJet is saying, “We want to hire 500 of them straightaway. They’re good people; we want them.” I am very confident for their future. All the support they need in the short term is being provided, but I am pretty clear that in a thriving sector those people will have a strong future.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Quite clearly this has been a huge repatriation and logistical task. Can the Secretary of State confirm, though, what entitlement passengers who have not yet travelled—I am sure most of us have them in our constituencies—have to a refund?

Chris Grayling: We will be continuing to give advice and guidance to those people for some considerable time. We will also be contacting people this week to see who wants and has a need to return, as part of the repatriation exercise. All those who have booked through credit card companies or who have ATOL protection, regardless of how long they are out there for—I am sure a small number will be out there for an extended period—will be able to secure a refund when the time comes.

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): As well as reviewing the effectiveness of the ATOL scheme in the light of this incident, will the Secretary of State take the opportunity to look at the providers of travel insurance? Many people travelling thought that they were covered for the collapse of an airline under their travel insurance policy, only to find that they were not.

Chris Grayling: This is something that I will want to take up with the insurance industry. It does seem unfortunate that cover should not include something

that happens once in 10 years. This is one area where there is a case for change. It would have made life a lot easier had that been the case.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the statement and the detail of what the Government have been doing, in particular the fact that 80,000 of 110,000 people abroad are now back in the UK. Can the Secretary of State confirm, though, that we will apply the lessons learned to the legislation currently going through the House to reform the ATOL scheme?

Chris Grayling: We have the advantage of having legislation before Parliament at the moment. If there are short-term measures that we could take, we would certainly be open to doing that, but I do not want us to rush into doing something without doing the ground work properly. We need to look carefully at what has happened, learn the lessons and make any modifications necessary. I assure the House that that is what we will do.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): We should give credit where credit is due; it has been a simply remarkable achievement to repatriate such a large number of passengers in such a short period, and I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, his Department and the CAA on putting this together. Here we are on the first Monday back after the conference recess, and we could have been faced with having 110,000 British citizens stranded overseas. Instead, thanks to his actions, 80% of them are already back and the rest can be confident of coming back on time.

Chris Grayling: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for those kind words. They are a tribute to the work done by people right across Whitehall—nine different Departments and organisations were involved—by those who have gone out to man the departure lounges at airports around Europe and by the people operating the airline. This has been a fantastic effort, they have done a brilliant job for all of us and I am very grateful to them.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to make sure that there is no loss in capacity and that excess slots that have now emerged are allocated as quickly as possible?

Chris Grayling: The fact that there is now some debate over the value of the slots as they are taken up by other airlines shows that there is a queue of operators waiting to move in where Monarch has been. We have already heard from Jet2 that it is looking to pick up some of the slack that Monarch has left behind, and I have no doubt that we will see others moving in very quickly as well. Our sector is thriving, those gaps will be filled and there will be lots of flight opportunities in future.

UK Plans for Leaving the EU

4.31 pm

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to update the House on our plans for leaving the European Union. Today, the fifth round of negotiations begins in Brussels and this Government are getting on with the job of delivering the democratic will of the British people. As I set out in my speech in Florence, we want to take a creative and pragmatic approach to securing a new, deep and special partnership with the European Union which spans both a new economic relationship and a new security relationship. So let me set out what each of these relationships could look like, before turning to how we get there.

I have been clear that when we leave the European Union we will no longer be members of its single market or its customs union. The British people voted for control of their borders, their laws and their money, and that is what this Government are going to deliver. At the same time, we want to find a creative solution to a new economic relationship—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Members must calm themselves; a little hush, please. The hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) has had something for breakfast which I counsel colleagues to avoid.

The Prime Minister: At the same time, we want to find a creative solution to a new economic relationship that can support prosperity for all our peoples. We do not want to settle for adopting a model enjoyed by other countries. So we have rejected the idea of something based on European economic area membership, for this would mean having to adopt—automatically and in their entirety—new EU rules over which, in future, we will have little influence and no vote. Neither are we seeking a Canadian-style free trade agreement, for compared with what exists today, this would represent such a restriction on our mutual market access that it would benefit none of our economies.

Instead, I am proposing a unique and ambitious economic partnership. It will reflect our unprecedented position of starting with the same rules and regulations. We will maintain our unequivocal commitment to free trade and high standards, and we will need a framework to manage where we continue to align and where we choose to differ. There will be areas of policy and regulation which are outside the scope of our trade and economic relations where this should be straightforward. There will be areas which do affect our economic relations where we and our European friends may have different goals, or where we share the same goals but want to achieve them through different means. And there will be areas where we want to achieve the same goals in the same ways, because it makes sense for our economies. Because rights and obligations must be held in balance, the decisions we both take will have consequences for the UK's access to the EU market and for EU access to our market. But this dynamic, creative and unique economic partnership will enable the UK and the EU to work side by side in bringing shared prosperity to our peoples.

Let me turn to the new security relationship. As I said when I visited our troops serving on the NATO mission in Estonia last month, the United Kingdom is

unconditionally committed to maintaining Europe's security. We will continue to offer aid and assistance to EU member states that are the victims of armed aggression, terrorism and natural or man-made disasters. We are proposing a bold new strategic agreement that provides a comprehensive framework for future security, law enforcement and criminal justice co-operation: a treaty between the UK and the EU. We are also proposing a far-reaching partnership on how, together, we protect Europe from the threats we face in the world today. That partnership will be unprecedented in its breadth and depth, taking in co-operation on diplomacy, defence and security, and development.

Let me turn to how we build a bridge from where we are now to the new relationship that we want to see. When we leave the European Union on 29 March 2019, neither the UK nor the EU and its member states will be in a position to implement smoothly many of the detailed arrangements that will underpin the new relationship we seek. Businesses will need time to adjust and Governments will need to put new systems in place, and businesses want certainty about the position in the interim. That is why I suggested in my speech at Lancaster House that there should be a period of implementation, and that is why I proposed such a period in my speech in Florence last month. During this strictly time-limited period, we will have left the EU and its institutions, but we are proposing that, for this period, access to one another's markets should continue on current terms and Britain should also continue to take part in existing security measures.

The framework for the period, which can be agreed under article 50, would be the existing structure of EU rules and regulations. I know that some people may have some concerns about that, but there are two reasons why it makes sense. First, we want our departure from the EU to be as smooth as possible, so it would not make sense to make people and businesses plan for two sets of changes in the relationship between the UK and the EU. Secondly, we should concentrate our negotiating time and capital on what really matters: the future long-term relationship we will have with the EU after the temporary period ends.

During the implementation period, people will continue to be able to come and live and work in the UK, but there will be a registration system—an essential preparation for the new immigration system required to re-take control of our borders. Our intention is that new arrivals would be subject to new rules for EU citizens on long-term settlement. We will also push forward on our future independent trade policy, talking to trading partners across the globe and preparing to introduce deals once the implementation period is over. How long the period should be will be determined simply by how long it will take to prepare and implement the new systems we need. As of today, those considerations point to an implementation period of around two years.

As I said in Florence, because I do not believe that either the EU or the British people will want us to stay in the existing structures for longer than necessary, we could also agree to bring forward aspects of the future framework—such as new dispute resolution mechanisms—more quickly, if that can be done smoothly. At the heart of the arrangements, there should be a double lock: to guarantee a period of implementation, giving businesses and people the certainty that they will be able to prepare

[The Prime Minister]

for the change, and to guarantee that that implementation period will be time-limited, giving everyone the certainty that it will not go on forever.

The purpose of the Florence speech was to move the negotiations forward, and that is exactly what has happened. As Michel Barnier said after the last round of talks, there is a “new dynamic” in the negotiations. I pay tribute to the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis), for all he has done to drive through real and tangible progress in a number of vital areas.

On citizens’ rights, as I have said many times, this Government greatly value the contributions of all EU citizens who have made their lives in our country. We want them to stay. In Florence, I gave further commitments that the rights of EU citizens in the UK—and UK citizens in the EU—will not diverge over time, and committed to incorporating our agreement on citizens’ rights fully into UK law and to making sure that the UK courts can refer directly to it.

Since Florence, there has been more progress, including reaching agreement on reciprocal healthcare and pensions, and encouraging further alignment on a range of important social security rights. I hope that our negotiating teams can now reach full agreement quickly.

On Northern Ireland, we have begun drafting joint principles on preserving the Common Travel Area and associated rights, and we have both stated explicitly that we will not accept any physical infrastructure at the border. We owe it to the people of Northern Ireland—and indeed to everyone on the island of Ireland—to get this right.

Then there is the question of the EU budget. As I have said, this can only be resolved as part of a settlement of all the issues through which we are working. I do not want our partners to fear that they will need to pay more or receive less over the remainder of the current budget plan as a result of our decision to leave. The UK will honour the commitments that we have made during the period of our membership. As we move forwards, we will also want to continue working together in ways that promote the long-term economic development of our continent. That includes continuing to take part in those specific policies and programmes that are greatly to our joint advantage, such as those that promote science, education and culture and our mutual security. As I set out in my speech at Lancaster House, in doing so, we would want to make a contribution to cover our fair share of the costs involved.

I continued discussions on many of these issues when I met European leaders in Tallinn at the end of last month. In bilateral discussions that I have had with Chancellor Merkel, Prime Minister Szydlo, President Tusk and the Taoiseach Leo Varadkar, there was a welcome to the tone set in Florence and the impact that it was having on moving the negotiations forwards.

Preparing for life outside the EU is also about the legislative steps that we take. Our European Union (Withdrawal) Bill will shortly enter Committee, carrying over EU rules and regulations into our domestic law from the moment that we leave the EU. Today, we are publishing two White Papers on trade and customs,

which pave the way for legislation to allow the UK to operate as an independent trading nation and to create an innovative customs system that will help us achieve the greatest possible tariff and barrier-free trade as we leave the EU. Although it is profoundly in all our interests for the negotiations to succeed, it is also our responsibility as a Government to prepare for every eventuality, so that is exactly what we are doing. The White Papers also support that work, including setting out steps to minimise disruption for businesses and travellers.

A new, deep and special partnership between a sovereign United Kingdom and a strong and successful European Union is our ambition and our offer to our European friends. Achieving that partnership will require leadership and flexibility not just from us, but from our friends—the 27 nations of the EU. As we look forward to the next stage, the ball is in their court, but I am optimistic that we will receive a positive response, because what we are seeking is the best possible deal not just for us, but for our European friends too. Progress will not always be smooth, but by approaching these negotiations in a constructive way—in a spirit of friendship and co-operation and with our sights firmly set on the future—we can prove the doomsayers wrong, and we can seize the opportunities of this defining moment in the history of our nation.

Much of the day-to-day coverage is about process, but this, on the other hand, is vital. I am determined to deliver what the British people voted for and to get it right. That is my duty as Prime Minister. It is our duty as a Government, and it is what we will do. I commend this statement to the House.

4.44 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for the advance copy of her statement.

Sixteen months on from the referendum, no real progress has been made. The Prime Minister delivered yet another definitive speech designed to herald a breakthrough that instead only confirmed the confusion at the heart of Government. If we want to judge the progress the Government have made since triggering article 50, we should not just look at the latest Florence speech. We should also look back at the Prime Minister’s last big Brexit speech in January, where she outlined 12 objectives for Brexit negotiations. How many of those objectives have the Government met 10 months down the line? The answer—none.

The Florence speech in fact demonstrated the scale of the mess the Government are making of these negotiations. Fifteen months on from the referendum, we are still no clearer what the future of this country will look like. The question must be asked: what on earth have the Government been doing all this time? They called an election in which voters refused to give the Prime Minister the mandate she wanted. Since then, Cabinet Ministers have been squabbling among themselves; all that time—15 months—wasted.

I am sure that the Prime Minister wanted her speech in Florence to bring life to these critical negotiations. On the substance of the speech itself, I am pleased that the Prime Minister has taken Labour’s lead and accepted the need for transition as we leave the EU. However, it is still unclear what she envisages for a transitional period

or how long it will last. The Prime Minister said the implementation period would last “around two years”, yet the Foreign Secretary interprets that as two years and not a second more and the Chancellor hints it might be more. He is here; he could correct us on that. The Prime Minister told us that, during a transition,

“access to one another’s markets should continue on current terms”.

Yet at the Conservative party conference, the Secretary of State for International Trade contradicted that and said:

“We will leave...the single market and the customs union, at the end of March 2019.”

The Immigration Minister told his party conference that freedom of movement “as we know it” will end in March 2019, so how does this square with the Prime Minister’s assertion that we “continue on current terms” during the transition? It cannot be both. Will the Prime Minister clear up the confusion and tell the House exactly what her implementation period means in terms of the single market, customs union and freedom of movement?

On the financial settlement with the EU, the Prime Minister has offered to commit funds to ensure that no EU member state has to pay more into the EU budget until the end of the current framework. We welcome this sensible offer. However, can she confirm whether the UK will be willing to pay money to the EU post-transition to access programmes that benefit this country? It is an important issue for many parts of Britain.

On the issue of citizens’ rights, the Prime Minister says this is an area where progress has been made with the EU. I am sure that many colleagues in this House will testify to the level of concern and, indeed, desperation of many of our constituents who come to our surgeries across the country in fear that families and friendships will soon be ripped apart. *[Interruption.]* No, it is not scaremongering. This is a serious issue that affects many people in this country—day in, day out—who are, frankly, frightened of the future. So I call on the Prime Minister again today to listen to the TUC and the CBI, and unilaterally guarantee the rights of EU nationals living in the UK. Given that this House voted in July 2016 to unilaterally guarantee the rights of EU citizens, can the Prime Minister finally reflect the will of the House and give people and businesses the assurances they need?

On Northern Ireland, we welcome the drafting of joint principles, but, 15 months on from the referendum, we should be beyond platitudes, and negotiating the practicalities.

The speech in Florence was supposed to put “momentum” into the Brexit negotiations. It is staggering that after—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. There was a lot of noise when the Prime Minister began her statement, and I indicated that people should calm down. The same applies now: the right hon. Gentleman will be heard, he will be heard with courtesy and he will be heard in full.

Jeremy Corbyn: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

It is staggering that, eight months after triggering article 50, the Government have made so little progress. The Secretary of State for International Trade said a

deal with the EU should be the “easiest in human history” —*[Interruption.]* That is what he said. Now, the reality for this Tory Government is beginning to bite, but if things do not improve, the reality may soon begin to bite for the jobs and living standards of the people of this country.

These negotiations are the most important in Britain’s recent history—vital to our future and vital to our economy. Just at the moment when Britain needs a strong negotiating team, we have a Cabinet at each other’s throats. Half the Conservative party want the Foreign Secretary sacked, the other half want the Chancellor sacked. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I say to the hon. Member for Braintree (James Cleverly) that I am advised that he is being groomed for statesmanship. I say to the aspiring statesman that it is, in the circumstances, impolitic at best, and rude at worst, for him to point. I am trying to help the hon. Gentleman.

Jeremy Corbyn: Rather than fighting over their own jobs, the reality is that millions of people’s jobs and living standards depend on the success of these negotiations. If this Government cannot negotiate a deal for Britain, they should make way for a team that can.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman talks about what has happened over the last 15 months. Well, I will tell him what has happened: this Government have triggered article 50 and are negotiating the leaving of the European Union. We are negotiating the practical details that need to be in place to ensure that, first of all, we get the best possible deal for the UK and that, secondly, we get a deal where the withdrawal is as smooth and orderly as possible.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about a number of the issues. He says that the Florence speech was due to give momentum to the talks; indeed, it has given momentum to the talks. But I happily say to him that the last thing we need in these talks is his Momentum.

The right hon. Gentleman said, “Will we leave the single market and the customs union in March 2019?” Yes, and I have said that we will. He said, “Will freedom of movement as we know it end?” and I have said yes. I have set out in the statement I made today—if he had read it—the point about the difference that will come in during that period.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about citizens’ rights. There is considerable agreement between us and the European Union on this issue; there are some remaining issues to be dealt with. I have been very clear at every stage that we want EU citizens in this country to stay. We welcome the contribution that they have made. But I am also clear that we want UK citizens in the 27 member states of the European Union to be given their rights too. Everybody in this House of Commons should have a care for UK citizens as well as for EU citizens.

Finally, he says that this is an historic moment. It is indeed an important moment for this country. This is an important and significant set of negotiations that will set this country’s future for generations to come and I am optimistic and ambitious about what we can achieve for our country. He said that we need to negotiate carefully. Yes, we do. That is why the article 50 letter reflected the principles I set out in the Lancaster House speech.

[The Prime Minister]

The Florence speech updates that and reflects the principles of the Lancaster House speech. What a contrast with a Labour party that said that it would respect the result of the referendum, then voted against the withdrawal Bill. The Opposition said that they wanted to leave the single market; now they might stay in the single market. They said that staying in the customs union was deeply unattractive; now they want to stay in the customs union forever. They used to be against a second referendum, but now they have refused to rule it out. With such a confused position on Brexit, no wonder it is said that there will be a run on the pound if Labour gets into power.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): Will the Prime Minister reassure me that the statement clarifies that it is not the Government's policy to seek, on the one hand, to remove all trading barriers with countries such as Japan and the United States, while on the other hand, to create new regulatory customs and tariff barriers with the European Union, with which we have free trade at the moment and which is our largest trading partner in the world? If that is correct and consistent with what she has just said, she will no doubt recall that ultra-Brexiteers, including the present Foreign Secretary, assured citizens during the referendum campaign that there would be no difference at all with our trading relationships with Europe, because they needed to sell us their Mercedes and their prosecco. Would it not be best to proceed with the negotiations on the basis that our ideal solution would be to stay in the single market and the customs union? She could then seek to negotiate changes to the conditions attached to that, which are the things to which she refers when she tries to explain where she is at the moment.

The Prime Minister: My right hon. and learned Friend has always been consistent on the issue of membership of the European Union. When people voted in the referendum for the UK to leave the European Union, I think they were voting for us to take control of our borders, our laws and our money. If we were to remain full members of the customs union and the single market, that would bring with it the continuing jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice forever and would also bring a requirement for free movement. I set out in the Florence speech and in the offer we made to the European Union what I have described previously as a deep and special partnership with the EU. He is right that we want to ensure that our trading relationship with the European Union can be as tariff free and as frictionless as possible, but we also see advantage in being able to negotiate new trading agreements around the rest of the world. I think that that is to the advantage of the United Kingdom, and that is what the Government will be pursuing.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I thank the Prime Minister for a copy in advance of her statement, although I must say that for a statement to take 13 minutes to deliver with not one mention of the devolved Administrations shows the lack of respect—
[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I say to the hon. Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) that it is a considerable discourtesy to walk out of the Chamber

past the Member who is on his feet in the middle of his attempted intervention. It is a point that is so blindingly obvious that the hon. Gentleman should not need to be notified of it, but as he apparently was not aware of the discourtesy involved he now is. When the House has settled down, perhaps we can hear the leader of the Scottish National party who, I remind the House, must be heard.

Ian Blackford: Thank you, Mr Speaker. We respect the fact that the UK has voted to come out of Europe, but we were told during our referendum in 2014 that if we stayed in the UK, our future in Europe would be preserved. Scotland has voted to remain and, in particular, wants to stay in the single market and the customs union, so it is about time that we got some respect from the Government. The situation is now critical. [Interruption.] I can hear Conservative Members chuntering; if they want to catch the Speaker's eye, they are entitled to do so, but perhaps they might show a little respect. These are important matters, and the public are watching this behaviour.

We stand on the brink of being dragged out of the European Union with no deal in place and facing the automatic introduction of World Trade Organisation rules. That would be a catastrophe for Scotland, threatening up to 80,000 jobs in our country alone. The President of the European Commission has said that "miracles" need to happen for there to be any progress in the negotiations. Meanwhile, the European Parliament voted last week to stop negotiations moving on to the next phase, citing lack of progress. The clock is running against the Prime Minister in more ways than one.

On EU citizens' rights, the Government continue to drag their heels. There must now be a universal declaration from the Prime Minister that EU citizens in the UK can have their current citizenship and rights protected after exit day. No ifs, no buts—do it today. I urge the Prime Minister to listen to the voices of the devolved Administrations. We will not accept the legislation as it stands; it is a complete violation of the Scotland Act and the biggest power grab since devolution. Indeed, just last week the author of Article 50, Lord Kerr, said that Westminster was trying to break the founding principle of the devolution settlement.

The SNP has set out three key tests on Brexit for this Government: first, as an absolute minimum, we want continued membership of the single market and the customs union; secondly, the Government must declare now, without delay, that EU citizens' rights are guaranteed; and, thirdly, the Government must accept that the withdrawal Bill cannot proceed in its current form. Will the Prime Minister live up to those asks, and will she end the immoral floundering over EU citizens' rights now?

The Prime Minister: As I am sure the right hon. Gentleman knows, there will be a meeting next week of the Joint Ministerial Committee, which brings the devolved Administrations together with Ministers here in the Government. There have also been bilateral discussions between the First Secretary of State and Ministers in the Scottish and Welsh Governments on an ongoing basis over the summer.

The right hon. Gentleman refers to citizens' rights. I remind him that during the Scottish independence referendum in 2014, which he referred to, the First Minister

told EU nationals that if the EU did not allow an independent Scotland to rejoin—it was clear that the EU would not do so—EU nationals would

“lose the right to stay here.”

[Interruption.] SNP Members are shaking their heads, but that is what the First Minister said at the time.

The right hon. Gentleman referenced what I said in my statement. My statement was about the position of the United Kingdom Government in the UK’s negotiations with the European Union, and Scotland is part of the United Kingdom.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I warmly welcome the statement by my right hon. Friend and very good friend, our Prime Minister, on her plans for the negotiations. May I press her and ask her to elaborate a little further? In her statement, she made it clear that the ball was back in the EU’s court. Is it not reasonable to expect that, given all the negotiations and discussions and the progress that has been made, the EU should now engage the United Kingdom on something that is beneficial to it and us—namely, an ongoing free trade arrangement, to be completed by March 2019?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right, and we see increasing interest in moving on to talk about that issue. That will absolutely be, as he says, not just in our interests but in the interests of the European Union; that is what is right for us both. We want the matter to be negotiated by March 2019, so that the UK comes out of the European Union knowing what the new partnership and trade agreement will be.

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): The Prime Minister has said very clearly she believes that, on her plans, we will be out of the customs union and the single market by March 2019. That was not the impression I got from the Florence speech. Will she therefore explain how the arrangements she is seeking for the transition differ from being a member of the single market and the customs union for the period of the transition?

The Prime Minister: I have to say to the right hon. Gentleman that, as we leave the European Union in March 2019, we will leave full membership of the customs union and full membership of the single market. What we then want is a period of time when practical changes can be made, as we move towards the end state—the trade agreement—that we will have agreed with the European Union. We have to negotiate for the implementation period what the arrangements would be. We have suggested that that should be a new agreement—an agreement that we should be able to operate on the same basis and on the same rules and regulations.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): My right hon. Friend’s Florence speech stressed the fundamental principles of UK democracy and accountability in this House, upon which all else depends. The Opposition voted against the withdrawal and repeal Bill, and the repeal of the European Communities Act 1972. Does she agree that our voters have every right to hear a public explanation from the Opposition—remainers and reversers—about

why, despite the referendum vote, they still subscribe, under the EU’s undemocratic system of lawmaking, to the closed-door Council of Ministers, where decisions are taken behind closed doors and largely in secrecy, which contrasts so vividly with what goes on in this House, with Bills and amendments, and with speeches and votes recorded?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to point the finger at the Opposition on this particular issue. They claim they are going to support the result of the referendum, yet they vote against the very Bill that will put that in place. Not only do they do that, but in voting against the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, they have voted against bringing environmental regulations into UK law and bringing workers’ rights into UK law. The Labour party voting against bringing workers’ rights into UK law; it is this Government who are supporting them.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Four days ago, the deputy governor of the Bank of England said that the UK financial services industry needs a transitional deal by Christmas, or else it will begin implementing its contingency plans—the Chancellor is well aware of them—to shift jobs and activities across the channel. Telling the House that the ball is now in the EU’s court, as the Prime Minister did today, does not exactly give those businesses the comfort and certainty they require, so will she tell the House what her plan now is to break the negotiating logjam and achieve such a deal in time for it to do its job for a sector of the economy that employs over 1 million people?

The Prime Minister: I say to the right hon. Gentleman that the Florence speech set out some details on an implementation period and how we think that that could operate. We now wait for the European Union to respond to the detail that we have set out. I recognise the concerns that business has for an implementation period, but I would say, finally, to the right hon. Gentleman that this whole process is not helped by the vast majority of Labour MEPs voting against moving on to the next phase of talks.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister’s statement that the Government will press on with working out the details for no deal. That is a very prudent thing to do and means there will be no cliff edge for British business. Does she agree that it will send the very good message to the European Union that we can do that, but that she is offering something so much better and more positive that it is in their interests to accept, and that any deal they counter with has to be better than no deal?

The Prime Minister: Yes, my right hon. Friend is absolutely right. I think we have offered a very good arrangement for the future to the European Union—I think it is not only in our interests, but in their interests as well—but as any prudent Government would, we continue to make plans for every eventuality. I think that is the only sensible thing for us to do.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Is it the Prime Minister’s understanding that, if necessary, it is possible to halt the article 50 process?

The Prime Minister: The position was made clear in a case that went through the Supreme Court in relation to article 50. The Government have made it clear that we have no intention of revoking that. We will be delivering on the vote of the British people.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): As my right hon. Friend wrestles with the inevitable compromises essential to securing the opportunities of Brexit in the national interest, and in view of this enormous administrative challenge, will she consider refining the machinery of government by creating an inner Cabinet to drive forward the work across the Government and thus retain greater grip and control over the whole process?

The Prime Minister: Ministers meet in a variety of forms to consider these issues. Before the Florence speech, I was pleased that the whole Cabinet came together and signed up to that speech. Of course, we have various discussions about the various elements of the negotiations, but I can assure my right hon. Friend that we are aware of the need to be able to ensure that we can make swift decisions when that is necessary in the negotiating process.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): May I press the Prime Minister to clarify her answer to my right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw)? He was not asking about Government policy: he was asking a straightforward question. Have the Government received any legal advice that the article 50 notice can be revoked?

The Prime Minister: I said to the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) that the position in relation to the revocation of article 50 was addressed by the Supreme Court in a case that went before it. It was very clear about that. We were clear as a Government that we were not revoking and it was clear in its consideration of the case of no revocation of article 50.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I congratulate the Prime Minister on her excellent Florence speech. It was widely welcomed, not just by British business but by people across the country, and it marked a real attempt by her to form a consensus on Brexit between the 48% and the 52% that everyone is crying out for. Forgive my throat, Mr Speaker—women with bad throats will not be silenced. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”]

I may not have heard properly or understood, but did the Prime Minister say that if by the end of March 2019 we do not have a deal on the final Brexit arrangements, we will jump off the cliff and there will be no deal? Or did she say that we will go into a period of transition and during that time those vital negotiations can continue?

The Prime Minister: The period after March 2019 is an implementation period to implement the practical changes necessary to move to the final arrangement and the new partnership we will have with the European Union. As the article 50 process sets out, the expectation is that it is a two-year process to negotiate the arrangements—to negotiate withdrawal and take into account, and therefore know, what the future relationship is going to be. I expect, and we are working on, having that future arrangement negotiated by 29 March 2019,

but because the chances are that the details of that may come quite late in the process, it will not have been possible for anyone—Governments, businesses or individuals—to have taken the practical steps necessary to move to that position. To get as smooth as possible a withdrawal, so that there is not a cliff edge, we have that period of implementation. That moves us to the final arrangement that has been negotiated by March 2019.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): Further to the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham East (Mr Leslie), which—with respect to the Prime Minister—was not about the Gina Miller case but about Government legal advice, can she tell the House whether the Government have received legal advice that article 50 is revocable?

The Prime Minister: I have to say to the right hon. Gentleman—perhaps I should have said this initially to the right hon. Member for Exeter—that of course we do not comment on legal advice that has been received, but the position was very clear in the case that he mentioned. The Supreme Court was clear that it operated on the basis that article 50 would not be revoked.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for her most encouraging statement. Recently in Washington, I found widespread enthusiasm among our American friends at the prospect of signing a free trade deal—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. The House is in a very excitable state. I have always enjoyed listening to the right hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson). I have been doing so for 20 years and I want to continue to do so. He can normally be heard, but the braying and banter was so loud I could not hear the fellow. Let us hear him.

Mr Paterson: I will say it again, Mr Speaker, for your benefit: I found widespread enthusiasm right across the American political firmament for the prospect of signing a free trade deal with the United Kingdom. Our American friends will welcome my right hon. Friend's statement, yet again, that we will leave the customs union, as that is a prerequisite for signing a deal. Will she give them her best estimate of when, after March 2019, we can sign a deal with third countries of a friendly nature, like the United States of America?

The Prime Minister: I echo the comments that my right hon. Friend has made. That is exactly what we found in our dealings with the American Government. We have a working group on issues relating to trade working with the American Government. The exact arrangements during the implementation period will be a matter for the negotiations, but we are clear that during the implementation period it should be possible for us to continue to negotiate trade agreements. We would not enter into anything that was contrary to the agreement we had come to with the European Union.

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): The Prime Minister has been asked several times about implementation of transition and has not made any sense at all in the answers she has given. She has said today that she foresees a framework for transition of around two years

along the existing structure of EU rules and regulations. The existing structure has the single market and customs union at its heart. How can what she is proposing for her implementation period be anything other than continued membership of the customs union and the single market, which our companies require?

The Prime Minister: I thought that I had explained this in response to one of the hon. Gentleman's hon. Friends. As of 29 March 2019, we leave the European Union. That means we leave full membership of the customs union and full membership of the single market. We will, as part of that—this is our proposal to the EU—have negotiated an implementation period to take us in a smooth and orderly process, so that the practical changes can be made towards the end agreement with the European Union. How long that needs to last will depend significantly on the nature of that agreement and how different it is from the current arrangements, but during that period what we are proposing is that it is in the interests of individuals and businesses on all sides to be able to continue to operate on the same basis as they do today. That would be part of the withdrawal agreement that we propose to negotiate with the European Union, so that negotiation would be about the basis on which we operate during the implementation period.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I was going to call a fellow, but he has beetled out of the curtilage of the Chamber so I cannot. He may beetle back again, but we will see.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm unequivocally that after 29 March 2019 the European Court of Justice's writ will no longer run in any way in this country and that any new laws agreed under the *acquis communautaire* after that date will not have effect here unless agreed specifically by Parliament?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has actually raised two separate issues but elided them together. The first is about the European Court of Justice. As I have just said in answer to a number of questions, we want to have a smooth and orderly process of withdrawal with minimum disruption. That is why we want the implementation period. We will have to negotiate what will operate during the implementation period. Yes, that may mean that we start off with the ECJ still governing the rules we are part of for that period, but we are also clear that we can bring forward discussions and agreements on issues such as a dispute resolution mechanism. If we can bring that forward at an earlier stage, we would wish to do so.

The second issue my hon. Friend referred to was the question of new rules brought in during the implementation period. Given the way things operate, it is highly unlikely that anything will be brought forward during that period that has not already started discussions through the European Union to which we are party until we leave and about which we would have been able to say they were a rule we would sign up to or one we would not. Any new rules put on the table during the implementation period, given the way these things operate, are highly unlikely to be implemented during the implementation period.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Our European friends are aghast at the chaos the Cabinet is creating. The Prime Minister has to put an end to the back-stabbing, briefing and counter-briefing from her Ministers and their surrogates. Will she show real leadership by ring-fencing the issue of EU citizens' rights; by confirming that the UK will stay in the single market and customs union—because I am not aware of anyone who believes that the border between Ireland and Northern Ireland is safe without it; and by sacking the Foreign Secretary, whose leadership ambitions blind him to the sustained damage his back-seat driving is doing to the UK's negotiating credibility and are increasing the chances of our crashing out of the EU?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct that we want the right resolution to the issue of the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. As I have said, we are all clear that we do not want physical infrastructure on the border or a return to a hard border or the borders of the past. I am interested in his approach, however, as I seem to remember that at one stage the Liberal Democrats were actively promoting the idea of a referendum on EU membership. Now we have had one, they do not seem to want to accept it.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend simply point out to people complaining that the negotiations are going too slowly that after the referendum on 23 June last year the EU refused to negotiate until we had triggered article 50; that even when we had, it refused to discuss the long-term relationship it wanted with the UK; and that even after her emollient and conciliatory speech, it is still refusing to discuss that long-term relationship? When does she call time?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right that it was clear early on that we had to trigger article 50 before the negotiations could start. We waited to do that until we had done considerable work in government to prepare us for triggering article 50, which we did, and the extent of that work has now been shown in the negotiations and position papers we published over the summer. On his last point, I simply say, as I have said before, that public pronouncements are of course sometimes made about the negotiations, but we are in a negotiation, and very often our discussions behind the scenes in private are more positive and constructive than some of the public pronouncements suggest.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): The Prime Minister's statement has been confusing. Can I get to the heart of that confusion? She says she wants the benefits of exactly the same terms of trade with the EU as we have now, for which we need regulatory equivalence. She also says we want the benefits of not being bound by EU rules in perpetuity, for which we need regulatory divergence. It is a simple matter of logic that equivalence is the opposite of divergence. She says we want a thing and its opposite. How will she resolve this obvious contradiction?

The Prime Minister: When two countries enter into a trade agreement, both sides agree the set of rules and regulations pertaining to it, but they also agree how

[*The Prime Minister*]

disputes will be resolved and what will happen if either side chooses to change or diverge from the rules and regulations. That is the position regarding our trade agreement with the EU, except that we already operate on the basis of the same rules and regulations. The European Union (Withdrawal) Bill will bring the EU acquis into UK law, so the key question, which will be part of the negotiations, is how we manage divergence on either side after that. It is the same as with any trade agreement.

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend believe that the EU genuinely wants a dynamic and creative future trade relationship with the UK in accordance with her vision? If so, where is the evidence for it?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I believe that such a relationship is in the interests of the remaining 27 members states of the EU and that as they come to look at this issue—they were not previously focusing on it, but Florence has now triggered their thinking on it—they will see the benefits of such a relationship not just to us but to them as well.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): The European Commission talks continually about the need for Her Majesty's Government to provide certainty and clarity. Is there not one area in which we could provide that certainty and clarity very plainly, today and in our negotiations? Could we not make it clear that in March 2019 we will withdraw from the common fisheries policy, take back all our fisheries, and ensure that our fishing communities actually take back control of who fishes in British waters?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady is right to suggest that when we leave the European Union one of the aspects of leaving it will be leaving the common fisheries policy. Of course, we will need to consider the arrangements that we want to put in place here in the United Kingdom for the operation of our coastal waters and the operation of fishing around them.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for the positive tone of her Florence speech, and for the constructive meetings that have taken place since then. Does she agree that it is in the interests of consumers on both sides of the channel for us to have a deep, special and bespoke partnership that covers goods and services? In that regard, I am thinking particularly of the hundreds and thousands of German consumers who have bought life insurance products from British insurance companies, and who will find that unless there is agreement, their pension plan savings are lost.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has made an important point. People often assume that only UK businesses and UK individuals will be affected, but actually people living in the remaining 27 countries of the European Union will also be affected, which is precisely why I think that the deep and special partnership to which my hon. Friend has referred is in the interests of both sides.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The shambles and division on the Front Bench would be funny if there were not such serious consequences for our economy, for jobs, and for the future of this country and the world. The Prime Minister is simply not being honest about a whole series of consequences for this country. [*Interruption.*] Excuse me, Mr Speaker. The Prime Minister is not being transparent with the public about the consequences for our economy. Will she say how much money she has put aside to deal with a disastrous “no deal”, and will she publish the economic assessments made by the Department for Exiting the European Union—whose Secretary of State is sitting next to her—of the impact on 50 sectors in our economy?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman talks about the position of the Government. The position of the Government is very clear, and was set out in the Florence speech. It is our offer to the European Union, and we await discussions with the EU about that particular issue. I have also made it clear, from Lancaster House onwards, that when it is possible for us to give information and updates on the negotiations, we will do so, but we will do nothing that would undermine our position in the negotiations.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): Given that Germany and France export more to us than we export to them, what discussions has the Prime Minister had with her French and German counterparts? Has she asked them to pressurise the EU institutions to secure a good deal for those countries, which means negotiating faster, more effectively, and with a shared understanding of what we can both gain from this deal?

The Prime Minister: I assure my hon. Friend that I do have discussions with the leaders of France and Germany, and, indeed, with the leaders of other EU member states. Others, such as the Dutch and the Belgians, also have a significant economic interest in our future relationship because of the economic activity at their ports. We discuss arrangements for the future with the leaders of those countries, and, as I said a little earlier, there is a growing sense and recognition of the importance of that deep and special trading relationship to the future of both sides.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister please tell the House the cost of Brexit to the public purse (a) if there is a deal and (b) if there is no deal?

The Prime Minister: It is not, of course, possible to answer that question at this stage. We are negotiating a deal, and we will not have negotiated that deal until, I suspect, close to the end of the period that has been set aside for it. At that point, we will be able to see what the benefits of the deal will be for the future of the British economy.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I commend the Prime Minister for her detailed statement. It was in stark contrast to what was said by the Leader of the Opposition, who left the House completely in the dark about his own position. Can the Prime Minister solve a dilemma for him? Why, if Labour Members are so concerned about Brexit, or even, indeed, about the

security of EU nationals after we leave, could they not bring themselves to debate the matter at all at their own party conference in Brighton?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. At the Labour party conference they actually refused to have a full debate on the issue that they now say is a matter of such consequence to them, but then that is typical: they take one position on a Tuesday and the next position on a Wednesday.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): We did debate the European Union and Brexit at our conference actually, but let me ask about another matter. As a result of our membership of the European Union, there are some 200,000 Britons living in Catalonia, and roughly the same number of Catalan Spaniards living in the UK. I do not think that anybody in this House supports the police brutality that we have seen in Spain, but the French Government have been absolutely clear that they will not recognise Catalonia if it tries to declare itself independent unilaterally. Will the Prime Minister today make that same guarantee for Britain?

The Prime Minister: None of us wants to see the sort of violent scenes that we saw on the streets of Catalonia; I want to see this situation resolved peacefully, as I am sure do all hon. Members. But we are very clear as a Government that the Spanish Government have the right to uphold the Spanish constitution and that all parties should be operating under the rule of law.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I very much support the Prime Minister in the final destination that she set out again today, but I have to say that her speech in Florence seemed like a reward for the EU's intransigence. Can she confirm that we buy around £70 billion more in goods and services from the EU each year than it does from us, and that when we leave we will be the EU's single biggest export market? Can she therefore confirm that there will be no more rewards for the EU's intransigence?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is of course right that the trading relationship between the United Kingdom and the European Union is very important to the EU, as well as important to the UK. What I did in my Florence speech was set out a vision—a proposal—for the future relationship between the UK and the EU, based on our current relationship, showing how we can develop that relationship in a way that is in the interests of both sides. This has switched the dial in our negotiations, and obviously we look forward to being able to enter negotiations on those aspects in more detail.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister said in her statement that she proposes “a unique and ambitious economic partnership” with the EU. If she is confident that the new unique and ambitious economic partnership that she envisages will be better for the UK economy than our current quite ambitious economic partnership and membership of the single market and customs union, then, further to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), why will she not today, alongside her White Papers, finally publish the list of the sectors of the economy for which

she has undertaken impact assessments and their results, so that the public can have the information about the impact of Brexit on the economy?

The Prime Minister: The full list of sectors will be published shortly.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): Following the recent German elections, power has moved from Berlin to Paris, so will the Prime Minister remind President Macron of the importance of being a good neighbour to the United Kingdom, because post Brexit, France will still be our neighbour, tens of thousands of French people will still want to visit and study here, and vice versa; we will still want to co-operate on environmental issues and immigration; and we will still wish to preserve our special defence arrangements with the French?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend makes an important point about not only our future relationship with the EU, but our future bilateral relationship with France. I can assure him that all the discussions that I have with President Macron, and that other Ministers have with their opposite numbers, are based on our not only maintaining but enhancing that bilateral relationship.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Do the two crippling tariffs imposed by the Prime Minister's American friends on British Bombardier jobs prove that Brexit or no deal will create a jobs hell?

The Prime Minister: The judgment that came out of the American Department of Commerce is a preliminary one. We await the final judgment of that Department, and the issue can then go to a trade Commissioner. We continue to work with the US and Canadian Governments, and Boeing and Bombardier, to bring about a resolution to this dispute and protect the important jobs in Northern Ireland. I understand that my right hon. Friend the Business Secretary will be making a statement on the matter tomorrow.

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): After the funfair of the conference season, may I welcome the Prime Minister back to her place as leader of this party, this Government and this country, and to the serious business of government? I congratulate her on the steely determination that she showed last week, including her setting out of an inspiring commitment to see this issue through on behalf of the next generation.

When the Prime Minister heard the Leader of the Opposition refer to Labour's policy of a transition phase, did she, like me, think that that must be the one that she herself announced in her Lancaster House speech? The only transition in Labour that I see is the one from a once great party to a party of Venezuelan socialism.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely spot on, on both counts. Indeed, in my Lancaster House speech, I said:

“I want us to have reached an agreement about our future partnership by the time the two-year Article Fifty process has concluded. From that point onwards, we believe a phased process of implementation”

to enable us to

[*The Prime Minister*]

“prepare for the new arrangements...will be in our mutual self-interest.”

So we thought of the implementation period quite a long time ago.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I have asked the Prime Minister the same question three times in this Chamber, given the importance of the European Parliament in the negotiations. Last time I asked her when she would address the plenary of the European Parliament. When will she do that?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Lady. I have spoken to the President of the European Parliament about my going over there and speaking with either the plenary or the Conference of Presidents of the European Parliament. I believe that our offices are negotiating on a date at the moment.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): I am sure that Members on both sides will confirm that listening to senior Danish politicians is a very good idea. Would my right hon. Friend recommend that the leaders of the other 27 EU countries listen to the wise counsel of the Danish Foreign Minister, who suggests that they stop playing games and now move on to negotiating our future trade arrangements?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend, who reaffirms the point I was making earlier: there are many in the European Union who do believe that the time is now right to move on to trade negotiations.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Stephen Kinnock.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): A perfect segue, Mr Speaker—

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): In Danish!

Stephen Kinnock: I won't do it in Danish—not today.

The Prime Minister's commitment to a transition deal was a welcome reality check in this whole process, but the European Parliament resolution of 3 October states that a transition period can happen only on the basis of the existing EU regulatory, budgetary, supervisory, judiciary and enforcement instruments. Does the Prime Minister agree with the terms of that resolution?

The Prime Minister: That is the view of the European Parliament in its resolution. In my statement and my Florence speech, I put out that we expect that the implementation period will be based on the current rules and regulations, but of course this is part of the negotiation.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): To negotiate an outcome consistent with the ambition that my right hon. Friend has set out, is it not absolutely essential that we invest in preparations against the possibility of no agreement at all?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I can absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend on that, and that is precisely why that is exactly what the Government are doing.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I am sure the Prime Minister knows that the Supreme Court did not opine on the question of whether article 50 was revocable, because the question before it was about our involvement. Therefore, why, when asked by my right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) what advice she had had recently, did she rely on the Supreme Court?

The Prime Minister: The point that I made in relation to the Supreme Court is that the court proceeded on the basis that article 50 would not be revoked; and I gave the answer to another of the hon. Lady's hon. Friends about what the Government do or do not say about legal advice.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): May I congratulate the Prime Minister on the tone she has set in the run-up to the decision of the October Council? I also thank her for the reply she has just given to my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne), making it clear that the Government have followed the recommendations of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs in its March report about the need to prepare for no deal. Will she confirm that individuals and businesses will also need to be in a position to make their contingency plans? Does she accept that, if the negotiations on the final settlement are postponed for at least two months in October, the Government will have to surface their no-deal preparations, so that businesses and individuals can share in making the necessary preparations? This will also rely on a vote of the European Parliament, and we saw what happened last week, with the Labour MEPs supporting a position that was absolutely against the interests of the United Kingdom.

The Prime Minister: First of all, obviously, I still expect that we will be able to negotiate a good deal, and that is what we are working for. It is important that we take businesses along with us and that we discuss and hear from businesses their reaction to the various issues being raised in the negotiations. Indeed, I and a number of other Cabinet Ministers were present at the business advisory council that was held in No. 10 Downing Street today. However, my hon. Friend's question seemed to be based on the premise that, if we did not get a formal notification of sufficient progress in October, that would mean that we would not be likely to get a deal. I do not believe that that is the case. I believe, as has been indicated by other hon. Friends, that we are seeing more of a movement on the European Union side to recognise the importance of discussing the trade negotiations and to consider the necessity of an implementation period.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): Let me begin by commending the Prime Minister warmly for keeping going at her conference speech. It could not have been easy.

The Prime Minister—and, I am sure, other Members of the House—will be well aware that the Good Friday agreement of 1998 was voted on by thousands and thousands of people in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and secured a majority in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. I am very pleased today that the Prime Minister has said that we owe it to the people of Northern Ireland and the Republic of

Ireland to get Brexit right. Will she therefore please look seriously at introducing a Government amendment to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill to guarantee on the face of the legislation that no regulations made under the Bill will repeal or amend the Good Friday agreement? That would be very helpful to people in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

The Prime Minister: Both this Government and the Irish Government—and indeed, increasingly in the discussions we have been having on the issues relating to Northern Ireland and the Republic, the European Union—have confirmed an absolute commitment to the Good Friday agreement. We are very clear that we stand by the Good Friday agreement, which, as the hon. Lady said, was hard negotiated and welcomed by a majority. We are absolutely committed to ensuring that nothing that we do in the Brexit negotiations in any way jeopardises the implementation of the Good Friday agreement.

Mr Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): May I congratulate the Prime Minister on her very encouraging and positive statement? Does she agree that it would be helpful if British businesses with interests in other European Union countries used their influence with the political leadership in those countries to impress upon them the need to have an agreement in everyone's interest? In particular, does she agree that they need to emphasise that the economic impact of not having an agreement by March 2019 will not only affect Britain, but hugely affect the other EU countries as well?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has made a very important point, and I certainly would encourage businesses and others to ensure that they are making that clear with their contacts in the 27 member states. I believe that that is already happening, and I certainly meet people from across the European Union who make exactly the point that it is in their economic interests to ensure that we get a good deal negotiated by March 2019.

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): Over the past 17 years, Wales has received £9 billion in grants from Europe. During the Brexit debates and the referendum, Tory Ministers said that Wales would not lose out as a result of Brexit. Can the Prime Minister tell us how much funding Wales will get—additional funding—after Brexit is completed?

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis): Nice bid.

The Prime Minister: Nice bid, as the Secretary of State says. Let me say to the hon. Gentleman—*[Interruption.]* Well, he changed from “not losing out” to “additional money” in his question. We have been very clear in relation to a number of elements where people currently receive funding related to the EU, such as under the common agricultural policy and structural funds, that we will meet any agreements entered into before we leave the European Union—in relation to the structural funds, as long as they meet UK priorities and are value for money. Thereafter, once we are outside the EU, it will be for us here in the UK to decide how we wish to ensure that different parts of the country are supported in the way that is necessary for them. What I have put

forward is that there should be a shared prosperity fund, which will look at the diversity and disparity within regions and between regions, and we will act accordingly.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Last week, I met a leading UK industrialist and we discussed Brexit and the hundreds of thousands of people employed in the sector in this country. Although he wanted to see an agreement and understood entirely the Prime Minister's implementation period, he is concerned that, if no agreement is reached, it is no good saying that on 29 March 2019—he needs to know now what Brexit without a deal would look like, so that he can plan for that eventuality. He asked whether the Prime Minister could publish those plans prior to Christmas.

The Prime Minister: I recognise the concerns people have about ensuring they know what the situation is going to be. The Government are working on what steps will be necessary for whatever the eventuality—whether we do negotiate a deal or whether we do not—and in doing that we are holding discussions with business.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): I thank the Prime Minister for prior sight of her statement. We have heard a great deal from her about the non-border that she envisages between the north of Ireland and the Republic, but I do not think we have heard a word about the border between Wales and the Republic of Ireland, even though the north Wales route through Holyhead is second only to Dover in its volume of traffic. Will she tell the House what she is doing to ensure that north Wales does not grind to a halt after Brexit?

The Prime Minister: I am very clear that as we look for a solution for the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland we do not want to set up a new border between the island of Ireland and the mainland of the United Kingdom. Obviously, what happens at the border the hon. Gentleman refers to will depend on the future partnership that we agree with the EU. We have put some proposals forward for customs arrangements that could pertain. When we get into the negotiation of that phase, we will be able to look at those issues in detail.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): Will the Prime Minister confirm that we will rule out a second referendum, unlike the Labour party, whose Members seem to be confused as to whether we should be speeding up the process or reversing it?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I am very clear that there will be no second referendum. The British people were given their opportunity to choose, they chose to come out of the European Union and that is what this Government will deliver.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): My constituent Jessica Simor, QC, from Matrix Chambers has done important work on the legal status of revoking article 50, and she is of the opinion that it can be revoked. The Supreme Court case that the Prime Minister referred to rules that the Government cannot trigger article 50 without an authorising Act of Parliament. Article 50 provides for the notification not of withdrawal but of an intention to withdraw, and the Prime Minister

[*Tulip Siddiq*]

will be aware that in law an “intention” is not a binding agreement. So I ask her once again: will she publish the legal advice she has received, which is important for the wider public to see?

The Prime Minister: I say to all those Opposition Members who have stood up today and asked about the legal position on revoking article 50 that the position is very clear. The British people voted in a referendum to leave the European Union.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): Will the Prime Minister confirm that no money will be paid for access to the single market, for two reasons? First, the EU sends a lot more goods and services to us than we send to it. Secondly, there are countries around the world that export to the EU single market without any problems at all.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is of course right that the EU has a number of trade agreements with countries around the world that enable those countries to deal with the single market on the basis set out in those agreements. As I have set out, we will honour our commitments—that is important for us as a country—and there are some areas, possibly in fields such as security and science, in which we will want to continue to be members of specific projects and programmes. If we do, it will be right that we pay an element of the costs of those projects and programmes. Those are the two elements that I have set out in our financial proposals.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Has the EU agreed in principle to a transitional arrangement with the UK?

The Prime Minister: Having an implementation period will be part of the negotiations. The EU has previously referenced the possibility of there being such a period, but we need to negotiate the length of that period and its implementation.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): There are five key NATO countries that are committed to the defence of our continent that are not members of the EU, and we will soon join that group. Will the Prime Minister give me an assurance that she will work closely with those countries, and with countries such as Poland that are on the frontline with Russia, to ensure that NATO continues to be the supreme defence posture for our continent, rather than a single European army?

The Prime Minister: We continue to believe that NATO is the bedrock of European security and we will continue to play a full role in NATO, as we have done over the years since its formation. I am pleased that we have British troops involved in NATO operations on the eastern border of the EU, protecting that border and giving that guarantee of European security.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): The Prime Minister has said that there will be no new infrastructure on the Irish border and no customs border over the Irish sea, and that we will not remain a member of the customs union. If all those options are ruled out, can she explain exactly what kind of customs border we will have?

The Prime Minister: I suggest that the hon. Lady has a look at the paper on that issue that we published in the summer.

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on her excellent answer to the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), but the vile brutality of the Spanish police really does disturb me. Any bold new strategic agreement on law enforcement and criminal justice cannot allow bullying of that nature, whether by member states or EU negotiators.

The Prime Minister: I assure my hon. Friend that the agreement that we envisage entering into with the remaining states of the EU on security, criminal justice and law enforcement matters will be mutually beneficial, particularly on the sort of data we can exchange across borders to ensure we are able to deal with the many challenges we face, especially those relating to human trafficking and modern slavery, organised crime and, of course, terrorism.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): As the vice-chair of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly, I recently visited Jersey with the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell). While there, we discussed the customs union, a customs union and a customs arrangement, but we did not get around to talking about a customs system. The Prime Minister has used various words to describe the border, from somewhere between hard and soft, to now talking about a physical border. Further to the comments by the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) and the Prime Minister’s rather flippant answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff), when will the Prime Minister do the communities on the Irish border the courtesy of visiting them to explain her analysis of the customs system in relation to the Good Friday agreement?

The Prime Minister: In relation to that issue, we have looked at the broader question of the customs arrangements and, as I say, we have published a paper that contains proposals for systems that could operate in future. In relation to the Northern Irish border with the Republic of Ireland, we are discussing with the parties in Northern Ireland, the EU and the Irish Government what the future arrangement might look like, but the EU recognises that it is not possible to confirm what that future arrangement will look like until we have looked into some of the wider issues of the future partnership between the UK and the EU.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Kristian Jensen has joined Wolfgang Schäuble—both are Finance Ministers—in saying that the negotiation would be easy were it not for the game playing. It is the modus operandi of the EU to bully on occasion, to brief the media negatively on occasion, and to bide for time right up until the wire. May I tell my right hon. Friend not to be naive—not that she would be—and listen to the ridiculous comments from Labour Members who have never negotiated their way out of a paper bag, let alone the EU?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We know the things that can be done in negotiations to appear to make life difficult. What matters is that the Government have their vision very clearly set on the end

state and the arrangement we wish to negotiate, and we are firmly committed to that negotiation. I can think of no better person than my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union to deal with the sort of methods that my hon. Friend set out.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Is not the major issue the fact that the Government's Brexit agenda is being driven by the Foreign Secretary on the pages of the *Daily Telegraph*—that is, when he is not moonlighting as Bernard Manning? Will the Prime Minister listen to the Scottish Government and not sacrifice 80,000 jobs on the altar of internal party politics by leaving the single market?

The Prime Minister: I have explained this on a number of occasions, but I shall do so again. The British people voted to leave the European Union. Leaving the European Union means not being a full member of the single market and the customs union. We have set out a proposal for a deep and special economic partnership with the EU that continues to enable both sides to trade with each other in a way that protects jobs and brings increasing prosperity to the United Kingdom and to the European Union. I say again, as I have said in the past: if the hon. Gentleman wants to ensure that jobs in Scotland are protected, he needs to make sure that Scotland remains part of the United Kingdom.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): The very last thing my constituents would want is the revocation of article 50. The British people voted for Brexit, they expect the Prime Minister to deliver it, and they have every confidence that she will. Will she reassure the people of Gibraltar that no agreement will be made unless they are fully included in that agreement, and that Spain has no veto over their future?

The Prime Minister: We are very clear on that. We have continued to hold talks with the Gibraltar Government—as, indeed, we have with others—to make sure that they are fully aware of the negotiations as they go along. We are very clear about Gibraltar's position. My hon. Friend makes an important point about the Labour party and the rest of the Opposition: they claim that they want to respect the referendum vote, yet here they are trying to suggest we should revoke article 50. That is the exact opposite of what the British people wanted.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): As a lifelong negotiator who has stood up for workers all my life against the actions of Conservative Governments, I say to the hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) that the jewel in the crown of British manufacturing is the automotive sector. It is a world-class success story that has transformed the lives of hundreds of thousands of workers, and more than half our cars are sold into the EU. Will the Prime Minister provide more detail on the implementation period? The industry is facing mounting problems, particularly given the importance of regulatory alignment to the sector and the integrated nature of European supply chains. If the Government get this negotiation wrong, they will do grave damage to the automotive sector and thousands of workers will pay the price with their jobs.

The Prime Minister: I recognise the importance of the automotive industry, but there are also a number of other industries here in the United Kingdom that are very important for our jobs and future prosperity. We have set out the framework for the implementation period. I have been clear both here and in the Florence speech about the rules and regulations that are required during that implementation period, but they have to be negotiated with the European Union, and that is exactly what we want to start to do.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am keen to accommodate remaining colleagues. However, although we have been blessed with commendably succinct replies from the Prime Minister, the length of some questions has equalled the eloquence with which they have been expressed, so there is a premium on brevity.

Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): Businesses in my constituency are concerned about outcomes, particularly the frictionless movement of goods across Europe and the mutual recognition of standards, rather than membership of particular institutions. Will the Prime Minister reassure me that, during the second phase of negotiations, those outcomes will be the Government's priority?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. That is exactly why we have said that we want to negotiate a new agreement and a new partnership with the European Union. It will be the interests of businesses across the United Kingdom that will be part of what is driving us towards that new arrangement.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): I thank the Prime Minister for her statement to the House today. I listened with interest when she stated that she was both a proud Unionist and strong on the Union. I take heart from that. I want to give comfort to the people in Northern Ireland on this matter of not having a soft or hard border down the middle of the Irish sea. I want that assurance because the people of Ulster feel that they are being set on the sidelines.

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to give that assurance. We do not want to see a border down the Irish sea either. We want to maintain the integrity of the internal market of the United Kingdom.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Former New Zealand High Commissioner Lockwood Smith has said that there are few advantages to the UK in leaving the EU without bringing back ambitious responsibility for our own trading arrangements across the world. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, while we all accept the importance of a short period of transition, we should not lose sight of the longer-term goal of pursuing our own trade deals?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There are real opportunities for the UK in negotiating those other trade agreements around the world. Although we will have that implementation period, we will be negotiating and ensuring that we can put into place trade agreements that will be of benefit both to this country and to jobs in this country.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): The writing is not on the wall for this Government as some say: it is just slowly sliding off. Why did the Prime Minister choose to deliver her statement from Florence when Ealing town hall would have had her? What was the cost of flying the entire Cabinet there in pounds or euros or in terms of the carbon footprint—any will do?

The Prime Minister: I am asked why I gave a speech about our future relationship with Europe on mainland Europe. I do not need to give any answer to that.

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that her concept of an implementation phase will only be enacted if firm plans and a schedule for implementation of permanent new arrangements between the EU and UK have already been agreed?

The Prime Minister: Yes. It is very simple: the implementation phase is a period for practical changes to be put in place. We cannot know what those practical changes are until we know the end state that we are driving towards. Having agreed on that end state and that future relationship, the period of implementation is purely to put the practicalities in place.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Within these important plans for leaving the EU, will the Prime Minister please confirm that safeguards have been put in place to ensure that the promised £350 million will be made available for our NHS?

The Prime Minister: As I said earlier, one reason why people voted to leave the EU was to control our money, so we will not be sending huge sums of money every year in perpetuity to the European Union. When we have left the European Union, this Government will be able to decide how we will deploy the funds that are available.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I congratulate the Prime Minister on her statement, and the tone of pragmatism in her Florence speech. Does she agree that, throughout this time and the implementation period, it will be right and proper to place our commercial interests front and centre in these matters regardless of any arcane or theoretical considerations, and that patience and pragmatism are not only important in the interests of this country, but most consistent with the spirit of our party too?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to put such emphasis on patience and pragmatism. That is exactly the spirit in which we are entering these negotiations. He is right that we need to consider fairly and squarely the commercial interests. We must also ensure that the deal that we reach is clearly in the United Kingdom's national interest.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): In her statement, the Prime Minister referred to a post-Brexit United Kingdom as being an independent trading nation. Can she explain how that will apply to just-in-time manufacturing in the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: An independent trading nation is one that is able to determine its own trading policy and to enter into trade agreements around the rest of

the world. What the hon. Gentleman is talking about is something that depends on having frictionless borders, and, as I have said, we want to negotiate with the European Union as frictionless a border as possible.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is good to hear not only the Prime Minister's optimism about the chances of striking a trade deal, but that we are preparing for no deal. In order to give businesses as much time as possible to adjust, will she consider drawing a line in the sand with a date attached to it by which, if we have not made sufficient progress, we will finally and simply walk away from the negotiating table?

The Prime Minister: One of the important points about negotiation is that we keep our hands as free as possible. We do want to ensure that we take business with us. As I have said, there are a number of ways in which we are discussing the future arrangements with business. The implementation period is important, and I hope that we can get on to discuss that as early as possible with the European Union, but we do need to maintain a degree of flexibility in our negotiating positions.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): By having not yet sat down to talk about trade, the European Commission has shown that its priorities are the integrationist European project and punishing this country for having the temerity to choose to govern ourselves. That does not bode well for any deal. Can the Prime Minister tell us what balance of resources is going into contingencies in the event of no deal compared with the amount of resources going into the negotiations?

The Prime Minister: We are doing the work that is necessary to ensure that we are prepared for whatever outcome emerges from the negotiations. The hon. Gentleman is right: there have been a number of speeches recently that suggest a more integrationist approach for the EU in future. I am clear that it is important that we are that self-governing nation and that we get that good deal with the European Union because it is in the economic interests of both sides.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Given that the EU has a £70 billion annual trade surplus with the UK, does the Prime Minister agree that the European business community should be far more vocal in its communications with its political leaders, because failure to conclude a deal would not reflect well on its competence?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right: it is important for businesses based in the European Union that we achieve a good trade agreement and a good new economic partnership with the EU, and I encourage them to make that point.

Mr Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): Would the Prime Minister care to comment on the remarks of John Bruton, who said that the EU cannot really trust the UK because of the huge divisions within her Government? Is that the impression we are giving our European partners?

The Prime Minister: No, the European Union is very clear on our position as it was set out in the Florence speech.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): At times such as this, it is important that Britain speaks with one voice—*[Laughter.]* The Opposition may laugh, but if that is the case, does my right hon. Friend agree that it was deeply disappointing that British MEPs voted against a furthering of the negotiations, which would have taken them to the crucial stage? Was she as surprised as I was that she was the only party leader to withdraw the Whip from those individuals?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is in the interests of this country that we move forward on those trade negotiations. I was astounded to hear that any MEPs had voted in favour of a resolution saying that sufficient progress had not been made and that we should not move to those trade negotiations. I have acted regarding the two Conservative MEPs who voted against British interests. It is time that the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) did something about the 18 Labour MEPs who did so.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): I very much welcome a transitional period for businesses to adjust, as will businesses and port authorities in my constituency. The Prime Minister has mentioned on three occasions the Irish border with Welsh, Scottish and English ports. I have read the paper this summer. I have read the House of Lords report and what the EU has said. Will the Prime Minister be clear on whether there will be a special customs union with Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland? Can she categorically say that there will be no physical borders in Welsh ports?

The Prime Minister: I have referenced the paper that the hon. Gentleman says he read this summer. It sets out a couple of options for the customs relationship overall between the UK and the EU once we have left the European Union. Of course, we need to get into these negotiations so that we can sit down with the European Union and discuss what will work for both sides. I repeat what I have said: we want to maintain the integrity of the internal market of the United Kingdom and we are very clear that there should be no physical infrastructure on the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): My local chamber of commerce welcomes the two-year transition period because business is, quite simply, booming in my constituency. The chamber of commerce actually gets that. It also gets that if there is a run on the pound, as the Opposition say there will be if they ever reach government, it will create not just job losses, but interest rate increases. If I am going to criticise my Prime Minister, it has to be on this statement—not what is in it, but the font. My ailing eyes cannot see it. In future, Prime Minister, please put it in large print not just for my ailing eyes, but so the Leader of the Opposition and his Front Bench can understand it.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for that suggestion. I will certainly give careful thought to it. I am sure that businesses in his constituency are thriving and recognise the value that is brought to them by having such a good constituency Member of Parliament.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): The Prime Minister says that she wants a unique trading relationship with the EU after Brexit, so she will be pleased to know that the citizens' assembly convened last month by the constitution unit at University College London reached the same conclusion. However, the members of the assembly also said that if a bespoke deal was not possible, the next best thing would be for us to remain in the customs union and single market. May I invite the Prime Minister to look at that piece of work? It was deliberately arrived at and there was a three to one majority among leave and remain voters for retaining those options if a deal cannot be achieved.

The Prime Minister: We are always happy to look at any contributions made to the debate around the negotiations, but I repeat that the European Union has been very clear about the indivisibility of the four pillars. If we want to be a full member of the single market and a full member of the customs union, it means maintaining free movement and the overall jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice. That is, effectively, not leaving the European Union. The British people voted to leave the European Union.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I warmly welcome the Prime Minister's statement, particularly her comments about EU citizens and, equally importantly, UK citizens living and working in the EU. She is right that the ball is very much in the EU's court, but will she ensure that the issue remains front and centre and is resolved as quickly as possible?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to give my hon. Friend that confirmation and reassurance. We said we wanted this issue to be looked at from an early stage and it has been. Significant progress has been made and I hope that the negotiators will be able to clear up the remaining issues between us in relation to citizens' rights so that we can give citizens that absolute certainty.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister confirm that there will be no new restrictions at the UK border for EU citizens wishing to come into the UK during the implementation period of "around two years"? I think that is the implication of what she has been saying. She also said that there will be a registration scheme. Who will she require to register?

The Prime Minister: It is right that people will be able to come to live and work in the United Kingdom, but those coming from the European Union after the point at which we have left the European Union will be required to register. This is part of the building block to the new immigration rules that will be in place at the end of the implementation period.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Constituents of mine at GCHQ play an expert and invaluable role in the defence of this nation and the continent of Europe. Does the Prime Minister agree that the unconditional guarantee of ongoing intelligence co-operation is a constructive step that should help to pave the way to early trade talks?

The Prime Minister: I would hope that the European Union would recognise the benefit of our security relationship and the relationship we have on matters of

[The Prime Minister]

counter-terrorism, as well as on law enforcement and criminal justice more widely. That relationship is in both our interests, and I hope the EU recognises its importance.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister say which particular elements of full membership of the single market she thinks should not apply in any transitional arrangements?

The Prime Minister: As I have said, being a full member of the single market is indivisible from full membership of the customs union, free movement and the complete jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice. We will be negotiating an implementation period and the arrangements on which we are able to operate. We will negotiate those as a country that will no longer be a member of the European Union.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): The Prime Minister has said that her position on Gibraltar is clear. If that is the case, can she explain why she made no reference to Gibraltar in her statement? Will she clarify what conversations she has had with the Spanish Government about the Gibraltar-Spain border?

The Prime Minister: We are very clear that the issue of borders and relationships is one that we wish to discuss as part of the overall future relationship between the United Kingdom and the European Union. As I said earlier, we have been continuing to discuss with the Government of Gibraltar their particular concerns and interests to ensure that we can provide a deal that works for Gibraltar as well as the United Kingdom.

Mr Paul J. Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Prime Minister agree that in the haste to seize control of laws, borders and money, no consideration has been given to how that is best achieved within the British state itself? Would it not be more satisfactory to convene a constitutional convention that would properly consider how the distribution of legislative and regulatory governance across the UK is achieved through each component part of the United Kingdom, including England itself?

The Prime Minister: We are doing a very simple thing. We are putting into place the wishes of the British people as expressed in a referendum and we are negotiating towards that future deal. I suggest that the

hon. Gentleman talks to the leader of his party. The Leader of the Opposition says that we are being too slow, but the hon. Gentleman says we are being too hasty.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister seems to have failed to notice that the vote in the European Parliament was 557 votes to 92—a clear rejection of the Government's chaotic strategy. It is confusing for everyone and, most of all, deeply damaging for business confidence and future investments. When will we hear exactly when the transitional arrangements will be in place? Businesses need to know now.

The Prime Minister: As I implied in my statement and have said in answers to questions, we have put forward a proposal for the implementation period. But this is a negotiation, which means that we need to negotiate the details of the implementation period with the European Union. The European Parliament gave that view, although it is not a binding vote. If the hon. Lady wants us to get on and negotiate the implementation period, she should have suggested to those 18 Labour MEPs who voted against that resolution, not in favour.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I gently remind the Prime Minister that if she wants to make a habit of suspending Conservative parliamentarians who act against the British interest, she really does not have to go as far as Brussels to find some prime candidates. Given her often professed concern for the fate of UK nationals living in the European Union, how does she feel about the fact that when we had the opportunity to debate that precise matter in Westminster Hall on 12 September, not a single Conservative Back Bencher saw fit to remain for the entire 90 minutes of the debate? Does that not speak volumes for the real lack of concern that her party has for the 1.5 million Brits overseas and the 3 million Europeans living here?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman cannot have it all ways. The Scottish National party complains to me that I am not making unilateral declarations about EU citizens here. My point is very clear: we have the interest of UK citizens in hand as well and we want to consider that interest. We are working on that. We are actively ensuring the interests of those UK citizens through the negotiations. It is not about standing up and talking about it; it is about doing something about it.

Mr Speaker: I am most grateful to the Prime Minister and to colleagues.

Points of Order

6.19 pm

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I wish to announce that I misled the House of Commons inadvertently on the last day before the recess. I said that the Facebook page “Unauthorised Amanda Solloway” had been taken down, but I was completely wrong, unfortunately. The hon. Member for Derby North (Chris Williamson), who could have had it taken down, continues to misunderstand what he is doing. Compass is a company that went into administration, and our former colleague is the wife of one of the directors, but she was not and is not involved. The page continues to pursue Amanda Solloway, but never mentions any other directors or their wives. Is there any way we could insist that this Facebook page is taken down, because it is misleading the public?

Mr Speaker: Facebook pages are not a matter for the Chair. It may be that the hon. Lady—I am very grateful to her if she is bidding for an increase in my powers—thinks that I should enjoy such, and a vista of opportunity I see before me opening up.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): No.

Mr Speaker: “No,” says the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), chuntering from a sedentary position in evident disapproval of the thrust of the implication of the hon. Lady’s point of order, but I can only say that it is not a matter for me. What I would say is that she has amplified her concern very eloquently this afternoon, and if she wishes to communicate her contribution here to wider audiences, including within social media, I am sure it is not beyond her wit to do so. I think we will have to leave it there for today.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am grateful for the opportunity to raise the Bombardier situation in my constituency. During this afternoon’s proceedings, you may have detected some glib and cavalier references to what is a growing and concerning trade dispute between the United States, Canada, Boeing and Bombardier, but 4,000 constituents are employed in my constituency, 1,000 of whom are directly responsible for, and engaged with, the C series. Given my concerns and those expressed by other Members throughout today’s proceedings, can you advise us whether there has been an approach by the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, and whether we, as Members who want to see a quick resolution to this spiralling problem, will have an opportunity to do so through a ministerial statement or some other means in the days to come?

Mr Speaker: Well, I do not think that the hon. Gentleman will be disappointed. I think he will have been attending keenly to the Prime Minister’s statement. On the assumption—I think, safe—that he was doing so, he will have received some encouragement. I think the Prime Minister gave a fairly clear indication of an intention on the part of a Minister to make a statement on that matter. I do not mind letting the hon. Gentleman know, just between us, that I myself have had an indication from the Government that this matter will be treated of sooner rather than later. Statements to the House have concluded for today, and we will shortly move on to other business, but there are other days ahead, and knowing what an eager beaver the hon. Gentleman is, and how assiduous he is in the representation of his constituents’ interests, I feel sure he will be in his place, for example, tomorrow.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Last month, the hon. Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna) raised a point of order, and I have informed him that I wish to raise this point of order, in relation to the procurement of repair work to Big Ben and the potential award to a company that has been described as being at the heart of the blacklisting conspiracy. Members of this House received a statement by email from the House of Commons Commission saying that that contract had been awarded and that the cost had, indeed, increased. Can you advise us whether the House of Commons Commission will make a statement to this House so that hon. Members such as myself, the hon. Member for Streatham and others can raise our concerns at the awarding of this contract?

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. The simple and short answer is that there are questions to the representative of the House of Commons Commission in this Chamber. It is perfectly open to the hon. Gentleman to question the representative of the Commission, and I have every expectation that he will do so.

I would just add en passant that the House of Commons Commission, of which the hon. Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie) is the hon. Gentleman’s party’s representative and, therefore, is well familiar with all this, has considered this matter carefully. We are conscious of our obligations to conduct any tender process fairly, and we expect the highest standards of our contractors. This is the subject of statements by the House authorities, with which I think the hon. Gentleman implied he is familiar, but all matters can be the subject of further questioning and scrutiny, and that is perfectly proper. I am sure he will be in his place to participate in any such exercise.

Government Policy on the Proceedings of the House

Application for emergency debate (Standing Order No. 24)

Mr Speaker: If there are no further points of order, I will in a moment call the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) 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 right hon. Gentleman has up to three minutes in which to make such an application.

6.25 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I stand to request your permission and the leave of the House that the House should debate a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration, namely the policy of Her Majesty's Government in relation to the proceedings of this House.

Before the House went into recess, we considered two Opposition day motions concerning, first, public sector pay and, secondly, student tuition fees. In both these debates, the Government argued against the motions before the House. When the questions were put, however, they remained silent, and each motion was passed without Division. In particular, it was known that, in the event of a Division, Members from the DUP would vote against the Government, who would, in all likelihood, lose.

It was widely reported that because the motions were non-binding, the Government took the view that they could effectively be ignored, as has ultimately been shown to be the case. It was further suggested in some quarters that the approach taken by the Government last month is one that we should expect to become routine.

I put that to the Leader of the House at business questions on 14 September, and, significantly, she did not deny it.

I accept completely that motions of this sort are not de jure binding on the Government. De facto, however, it has long been the practice of Governments of all colours to respect the views of the House expressed in this way. Over the years, Opposition day votes have been an important means of influencing Government policy and righting wrongs. Hon. Members will recall the vote in 2009 concerning the residence rights of those who had served as Gurkhas. That was an issue resolved in this House by an Opposition day motion.

Mr Speaker, the Government are seeking to treat this House as a talking shop, rather than the place in our nation's life where decisions of note are made. The formation of a Government that do not command a working majority in this Chamber is a rare moment in our nation's constitutional story. It is a moment for us to assert the will of Parliament, not to see it sidelined. Those currently on the Treasury Bench will clearly find that inconvenient, but we are here to hold them to account, and not simply to do their bidding. It is for that most fundamental of reasons that I seek to bring this matter to the House for its urgent attention.

Mr Speaker: I have listened carefully to the application from the right hon. Member. I am satisfied that the matter raised is proper to be discussed under Standing Order No. 24. Has the right hon. Member the leave of the House?

Application agreed to.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman has obtained the leave of the House. The debate will therefore be held tomorrow, Tuesday 10 October, as the first item of public business. The debate will last for up to three hours, and it will arise on a motion that the House has considered the specified matter set out in the right hon. Member's application.

Gypsies and Travellers and Local Communities

6.29 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government (Alok Sharma): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Gypsies and Travellers and local communities.

We are fortunate to live in one of the most tolerant countries in the world—I would go so far as to say that Britain is the most tolerant—and underpinning that tolerance are a set of common values that the vast majority of those from all communities in our country abide by. Those values include respect—respect for the rule of law, respect for property, public and private, and respect for one another.

Whatever our political differences, I know that every member of this House wants us to live in a just and fair country where equality of opportunity flourishes and the life chances of all our children, across all communities, are enhanced, so, as we have this debate, I want to focus on four main themes. The first is the impact on settled communities when a small minority does not show respect for the rule of law. The second is the remedies that are available to the police and local councils to deal with illegal behaviour. The third is the Government's response to date in addressing matters related to the Traveller community, as well as what, in concrete terms, we intend to do further. The fourth is what the Government are doing to improve the life chances of the Traveller community, most importantly the young.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): On the Minister's second point, the West Midlands police and crime commissioner, David Jamieson, has done a huge amount of work on these issues and has set out a number of proposals to try to deal with them, which I—and, I am sure, other Members from the west midlands—will be talking about later. Would the Minister be prepared to meet David Jamieson and a number of west midlands MPs to discuss the impact of these issues in our region?

Alok Sharma: Of course I will ensure that I meet the police and crime commissioner, or that a Home Office Minister does so if that is more appropriate. I have seen the piece of work that was produced, and it is an incredibly useful document.

As I was saying, we want every single child in our country to get the best education and the best start in life, and to fulfil their potential, and that absolutely includes children from the Traveller community.

I know that in today's debate we will hear accounts of the damage left in the wake of illegal encampments and a call for local authorities and the police to do more and to move faster in dealing with them. Indeed, many Members have written to me highlighting the impact illegal incursions have on their constituents. I recognise, as I am sure the whole House does, the huge sense of frustration and anguish about the issue that many people feel.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): I personally am not tolerant. My constituents are not tolerant. When Gunners Park was littered, when Trinity football ground was paved over with a travelling community,

and when Cherry Orchard Park was invaded, my constituents were not tolerant. Can we have a three strikes and out rule? These people have expensive land cruisers and big trucks. If they park on council land or private land more than three times, may we give the police the power to take those assets and sell them for the good of the community and to clear up some of the mess that is left behind?

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend expresses a view that many colleagues will have experienced in terms of the frustration felt by their constituents.

Let me talk about the powers the police have and about what we intend to do. As I said, many Members have written to me highlighting the impact illegal incursions have on their constituents. I recognise this huge sense of frustration; indeed, I share it. In recent months in my constituency of Reading West, we have had numerous illegal encampments set up on public land, including nine separate visits to Prospect Park in Tilehurst. These incursions have caused my constituents significant distress, as each leaves behind enormous amounts of waste and cleaning comes at a considerable cost to the law-abiding taxpayers.

We all aspire to peaceful and integrated co-existence between communities, where we all share the same rights and responsibilities, but there is a perception among the settled communities—our constituents—that the law does not apply equally.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): I think that it would be fair to say that it is more than a perception. Many of us, certainly on the Government Benches, have heard repeatedly about this issue in our surgeries, as well as in discussions with district councillors. It is raised constantly. It is a real problem, rather than a perceived one.

Alok Sharma: Obviously, when there are problems we expect local authorities and the police to act. The view of people in the settled community is that if they were flouting the law in the same way as a small percentage of Gypsies and Travellers do, they would be treated more harshly by the authorities.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I want to reinforce what was said by my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin). It is vital for the west midlands that the Minister meets the police and crime commissioner, as well as MPs from the area, as soon as he can to try to resolve this problem. There is a lack of resources for police and local authorities and a weakness in the law—that is meant in no way to discriminate against genuine Travellers, by the way.

Alok Sharma: I hope that what I say towards the end of my speech will give the hon. Gentleman some comfort.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): Forgive me for interrupting, but will the Minister give the House the sense that he appreciates that this is not a static situation? In the west midlands, for example, the number of unauthorised incursions has doubled since 2011. This debate takes place against the backdrop of an increasing problem, not a static fact.

Alok Sharma: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. The fact that we have so many colleagues present for the debate makes it clear that this is an issue we feel deeply about. I want to re-emphasise that the law applies equally to everyone, and it must be seen to apply equally to everyone in practice.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that the police sometimes see these cases as trespass, whereas many include criminal damage? If such damage has occurred, these instances should be viewed as that.

Alok Sharma: The law is very clear on criminal damage, but I want to talk about the powers the police have and what additional powers they have if there are transit sites or permanent sites available in the local area.

Let me set out the powers for local authorities in dealing with illegal encampments. First, it is important to put the number of illegal encampments in context. The January 2017 Traveller caravan count indicated that 13% of encampments were illegal, and about a third of those were on land not owned by travellers, yet no matter what the figures say, I know that illegal encampments often cause strife. We have already heard that in this debate.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I am pleased that the Minister has put some perspective into his comments by noting that a very small minority of the Gypsy and Traveller community is in unauthorised encampments, from within the small minority who are actually travelling—three quarters are settled in brick and mortar accommodation. Given that this is a debate about Gypsies and Travellers, I am looking forward to hearing his fourth point about the disadvantages suffered by the Gypsy and Traveller community.

Alok Sharma: I will of course talk about that, because it is an important issue and we need to be proportionate in how we handle it. We must ensure that the life chances of all communities are enhanced.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I will be contributing to the debate later, but as the Minister is talking about statistics and the figure of 13%, will he consider that, although 13% might seem like a small percentage, when a community is repeatedly affected by Travellers, it seems disproportionate?

Alok Sharma: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend.

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): I just want to pick up on the last but one point about the disadvantages suffered by the Traveller community. It is extremely difficult to defuse innate concern among the settled community and potential hostility towards the Travellers if we are all suffering, and I think that all of us will have encountered periodic and repeated incursions with temporary and illegal settlements of one kind or another. With all due respect to the people who gathered the Minister's figures, as the figures were collected in January, I suspect the result would be very different if the numbers were collected in July.

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The figures that I am citing are collected in January, but also in July, and I would be happy to share them with him. The fundamental point is that every incursion and illegal encampment causes problems, and that is what matters to constituents and communities up and down the country.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Will the Minister acknowledge that prevention is better than cure? What can be done to ensure that there are more authorised sites available, particularly in areas of the country that are feeling the pressure of unauthorised sites?

Alok Sharma: Prevention is, of course, better than cure, but it is also important that all communities abide by the law.

Local authorities and the police already have extensive powers to take action. Councils have a range of powers available to them. They can very quickly obtain a possession order to remove trespassers from land, and they can apply to the courts for pre-emptive injunctions that prevent unauthorised camping in a defined area. The police also have powers under sections 61 and 62 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Alok Sharma: If I may proceed a bit further, I will give way.

Under section 61, the police can remove trespassers who cause criminal damage or engage in abusive and intimidating behaviour, or who have six or more vehicles on the land. The police can also seize and remove vehicles from illegal encampments. Under section 62, if transit or permanent Traveller sites are available—I think this is the point that the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) made—the police can act immediately. We know that local authorities, the police and other agencies can work effectively in a multi-agency approach. There are examples of good practice across the country, and I know that colleagues will raise them.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): The Minister says that the police can take action quickly and that everybody should be treated equally under the law, but my constituents had to wait for days and days to have an illegal encampment dealt with. The Travellers trashed the local playground—human excrement was left on the children's play equipment—but the police could not take action for days. My constituents believe that there is one set of rules for one community and another set of rules for others, and that the police cannot take action fast enough.

Alok Sharma: The circumstances that my hon. Friend outlines are not, unfortunately, unique to her constituency. I think each of us will have a similar example.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Alok Sharma: My goodness, there are such riches when it comes to taking interventions. It is important that the available powers are used fully by the police.

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): I thank the Minister for giving way. Does he accept that section 62A only covers the principal or highest-tier local authority? In the case of my constituency, a site just over the border in Berkshire cannot be considered for Traveller pitches. Will the Government look at how the law is drafted to make sure that it has the intended effect?

Alok Sharma: If my hon. Friend is patient, I will come on to precisely those points.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): The Minister has been patient with interventions. I will keep this brief, because I hope to catch your eye later, Madam Deputy Speaker. Is the Minister's position on the law that what he has read out is good enough? I would counsel him against reaching that conclusion. The point is that the law is not good enough. It is too slow and too expensive, and the people who pay the cost are our constituents. We need legal change to make the removal of illegal encampments faster and cheaper.

Alok Sharma: The right hon. Gentleman makes the case eloquently.

John Penrose: The Minister is being very generous in giving way. I want to echo the comments that have just been made. The feedback from North Somerset Council and my local police indicates that, although the current powers are extensive in theory, they do not work in practice. They are too slow, and there are too many loopholes. The miscreant element of the Traveller community that is the cause of these problems understands the loopholes all too well, and we end up playing cat and mouse across county boundaries and authority boundaries. We absolutely need to reword the law, so that it works fast and effectively for the settled community as well as for the Traveller community.

Alok Sharma: I agree. We need fairness in the law, and we need it to be applied in a manner that works for the settled community.

Having given way to quite a few Members, I will proceed and see whether I can gallop through. As I have indicated, local authorities, the police and other agencies can work effectively together. There are examples of such work in the west midlands and Warwickshire, and I am sure that colleagues will talk about them. I agree that the police can act much faster when there are sites to direct Travellers to. That is why we expect local authorities, as a minimum, to plan for a five-year supply of deliverable and developable sites for Travellers.

The number of Traveller caravans on authorised sites rose from 14,498 in July 2010 to 17,938 in July 2016. We need all local authorities to step up to the plate in providing sites. Local authorities that meet their requirements help to limit the prevalence of illegal encampments. We expect local authorities and the police to clamp down on such encampments, but unless there are sufficient sites, the police and local authorities will not be able to use their powers fully.

In March 2015, the Government wrote to council leaders, police and crime commissioners and police chief constables about their response to illegal encampments. We were concerned that local authorities and the police

were not being seen to be doing enough to stop such incursions, and we reiterated that the Government want local authorities, the police and other local agencies to work together to address incursions. We reissued a summary of the robust powers to remove unauthorised sites, but I am aware of growing concern that the available powers are not being used fully.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD) *rose—*

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con) *rose—*

Alok Sharma: If I may, I will proceed. The Government have made important progress in ensuring that the needs of Travellers are balanced with those of the settled community. In 2012, the Government published the planning policy for Traveller sites, which requires planning authorities to make their own assessment of need. As I have said, that means identifying a five-year supply of deliverable Traveller sites. We revised that policy in 2015 and gave increased protection to the green belt.

Helen Whately: Will the Minister give way?

Alok Sharma: I will give way to my hon. Friend, who has been very patient.

Helen Whately: I thank the Minister for giving way. I have in the past expressed frustration with my local council for not taking enough action, but there is one site in my constituency where the local council has taken action. In December 2016, three enforcement notices were served on that site, but the appeal against those notices will not be heard until March 2018, because, as I understand it, of the difficulty of getting somebody from the Planning Inspectorate to hear the appeal. I ask my hon. Friend to consider whether there are enough resources at the centre to address the problem, in addition to the steps that our local councils need to take.

Alok Sharma: I would be happy to discuss that case with my hon. Friend afterwards.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Alok Sharma: If I may, I will make some progress.

We introduced a general duty to assess the accommodation needs of all sections of the community who reside in caravans, and we sought to strengthen the local authority position in determining inappropriate development by having up-to-date local plans.

We have reflected on the views about illegal encampments expressed by Members in previous debates and in letters to the Department—we are hearing those views loud and clear today—and I can announce that the Government intend to consult on the effectiveness of enforcement against unauthorised developments and encampments. We want to seek views on whether there is anything we can do to ensure that existing powers can be used more effectively. Let me be clear, however: this is not a signal to local authorities and the police that they should wait for the outcome of such a consultation. They have the powers to act, and we expect them to act.

Wera Hobhouse: I thank the Minister for giving way. I welcome the announcement that local authorities are being encouraged to provide more settled sites, but does the Minister agree that the enforcement problems that local authorities and the police face often relate to a lack of resources, due to local government cuts?

Alok Sharma: Over £200 billion is being made available to local authorities to deal with a range of issues over the next four years. Several colleagues have made the point about cross-agency and cross-authority working, which I am sure we will hear about in this debate, and that is absolutely the way to go.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Alok Sharma: If I may continue, while it is right that we seek to deal with illegal encampments, which are perpetrated by a small percentage of the Gypsy and Traveller community, we need to do everything we can to improve the life chances of that community. The Gypsy and Traveller community has had poor life chances for too long, and it is the ethnic group with the lowest educational attainment and the worst health outcomes.

When it comes to education, we expect schools to have data and evidence-led approaches to support all their pupils—whatever their backgrounds. High proportions of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils claim free school meals and benefit from our strategy to raise the attainment of disadvantaged pupils through the pupil premium. We have invested £137 million in the Education Endowment Foundation to help schools understand what can raise disadvantaged pupils' attainment. As for access to healthcare, the Government have commissioned research to investigate which approaches to community engagement are most likely to be effective at enhancing trust between the Traveller community and mainstream healthcare services. That project is due to report in November this year.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I welcome the Minister's announcement that the Government will consult on solutions to this difficult problem. If I heard him correctly, he said that they will consult on whether existing powers can be better used, but will he confirm whether the consultation will consider whether new powers are necessary? Will it cover both of those things or just the first?

Alok Sharma: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. Colleagues and constituents will be welcome to write in to the intended consultation with all their views on the current powers or on additional powers that they think may be necessary.

NHS England is working to improve access to healthcare and health outcomes for Gypsies and Travellers. In November 2015, NHS England produced guidance for GP practices to clarify the rights of all patients, including patients from the Gypsy and Traveller community. The guidance includes the responsibilities of providers in registering patients with a GP practice and was complemented by the publication in March 2017 of a patient-facing leaflet to support people from Gypsy, Traveller and Roma communities to register with a GP. The Prime Minister launched an audit in August 2016 to look into racial disparities in public services stretching

right across government, and it will be published shortly. My Department will act upon the recommendations that emerge from the audit and will also publish a new integration strategy in the coming months.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): York Travellers Trust does excellent work in providing support for York's travelling community. However, it says that the community needs proper facilities on sites, especially warm areas for children to play and learn in. Will the Minister consider that in any future planning for sites to ensure that families have proper spaces in their community?

Alok Sharma: The location of sites and the provision of services are matters for local authorities, so I encourage the hon. Lady to talk to her local authority about that.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Alok Sharma: I am about to conclude. I have taken quite a few interventions, but I apologise to colleagues who have not been able to intervene.

Britain is one of the world's most successful multiracial and multicultural societies. My Department works to bring communities together—we build on what unites us—but to belong to Britain we must all embrace a common set of values, and we must all show regard for the law. We are committed to making sure that Gypsies and Travellers can benefit from the same life chances as everybody else, but we are also prepared to take strong action when people refuse to follow the law. With our intended consultation, I want to send a clear message: the Government are listening.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Before I call the Opposition spokesman, it will be obvious to the House that a great many people want to speak this evening and that time is limited. I therefore warn colleagues in advance that there is likely to be a time limit on Back-Bench speeches, starting at about seven minutes and probably going down depending on the number of interventions and how long people speak for. As ever, it is for each colleague to have regard to others as well as to himself or herself.

6.55 pm

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): I feared that I had come into the wrong debate. I am fairly certain that this debate is about Gypsies, Travellers and local communities, but the Minister finished his speech—I applaud his final remarks—by making a real point about the overwhelming majority of the travelling community, who are law abiding and who live settled lives, but against whom the disadvantages are enormous. The House ought to recognise that as well as recognising, as I do as a constituency MP, that the antisocial and illegal actions of some are unacceptable. We have to get the balance of our debate right.

I will come on to discuss unacceptable encampments, but the Minister is right to say that all communities must abide by the law. Most of the travelling community does abide by the law, and we need to place it on record that the Gypsy, Romany and Traveller community are

our fellow citizens. That group probably faces the biggest levels of prejudice and discrimination in Britain, and the House has a duty to do something about that for our fellow citizens. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) shakes his head, but I hope he does not disagree with that point.

A YouGov and Traveller Movement poll, the results of which were released today, rather sadly show that 10% of our fellow people would still be extremely unhappy at one of their family members having a relationship with somebody from the black or Caribbean community and that 3% would be unhappy about a relationship with someone from the White British community. However, it also found that 42% of people in this country would be unhappy about a relationship with somebody from the travelling community. That demonstrates the level of prejudice that still exists in this country.

The various parts of the Traveller community are simply not homogenous. Some 75% of the Traveller community are actually not travellers and live in bricks and mortar, just like hon. Members from both sides of the House. It is a minority—something like 1,400 of the 22,000 caravans that exist—that causes real nuisance. Government Members have been absolutely right to say that when incursions take place, as they have in my constituency, that is unacceptable to the local communities who suffer the damage, but we must still say that Gypsies and Travellers are part of the local community in many places.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Tony Lloyd: I just want to make a few more points, but I will most certainly give way in a moment.

Many Travellers are in jobs—skilled, unskilled and professional—and some are public servants. I call to mind Jim Davies, a sergeant in the Thames Valley police. Along with Petr Torak of Cambridgeshire police, Jim Davies founded the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Police Association, which now has 100 members. Having spent a lot of time in recent years trying to increase the number of people from minority communities in our police force, I found it interesting that the Traveller community is one of the few groups with a proportion of people in the police that more or less mirrors its proportion in society more generally. Jim Davies, who has a Romany background, is about to retire after 30 years of serving the people of Thames valley and I applaud him.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tony Lloyd: I will give way to my right hon. Friend first, and then to the hon. Gentleman.

John Spellar: Does my hon. Friend accept that the public view of the community will continue to be shaped by the appalling behaviour of the minority, who bring absolute chaos to their own communities, and by the perceived inability of the authorities to act, even though they can act under existing powers, as my own borough of Sandwell has demonstrated, by creating a site to

which Travellers can be directed straightaway—within 24 hours—and by taking out orders against individual families who persistently break the law? When such action is taken, the public will be reassured and will live in greater harmony with the majority of the community who, as he is absolutely right to say, are acting peacefully and lawfully. We must deal with these rogue elements.

Tony Lloyd: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right, but let us be very clear that if we were talking about any other minority community, the idea of stigmatising the majority because of the illegal behaviour of a minority would be unacceptable and atrocious. We must not stigmatise them. We should act against those whose behaviour is unacceptable and illegal, but we should not stigmatise them.

Bob Stewart: I actually lived in a Traveller community for a few days, and I must tell the House that one of the biggest problems is that people who act illegally are giving their children no chance in life because they cannot get an education. Most of the children under 17 in the encampment I was in, which was mixed, could not read. When I advocated their joining the Army, for example, they said, “Mister, you don’t understand. They wouldn’t have us.” It took me two days to understand what they meant: they could not read. This is something we have to crack.

Tony Lloyd: I am with the hon. Gentleman on that. Let me remind him, if I may, of Jim Davies, about whom I spoke a few moments ago—a Romany who spent 30 years serving the public in our police force. People like that are already the role model we want in that community.

Robert Jenrick: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tony Lloyd: I will not give way, if the hon. Gentleman will forgive me. I need to make a little progress; otherwise I fear I will be taking time off those who want to disagree with me later.

When a seven-year-old child says plaintively, “People don’t like us”, surely that should prick the conscience a little of those who want to stigmatise the whole of the travelling community. When we know that 77% of the travelling community have been victims of hate crime or hate speech, when we know that less than 20% would report hate crime or hate speech to the police because they fear no action would be taken, when we know that half of the Traveller community when seeking employment—the sort of thing we want them to do—have faced discrimination, and when we know from a recent survey that four in 10 of our fellow countrymen and women would not want their child to play in a Gypsy home, we know we have a problem.

The 2015 report of the Equality and Human Rights Commission made it clear that the position of Travellers is getting worse. As the Minister conceded, we still have massive challenges to face in many different areas. The hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) made a point about education. Some 57% of young people now get GCSEs with five grades from A to C, but among the Irish Travellers the figure is as low as 18% and among the Gypsies it is as low as 9%, so we know we have a problem. Another problem is when a teacher says to

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people in her class, “There’s no point in teaching you as you’ll end up tarmacking drives.” We have a problem in our educational system.

We know that people are denied access to our health services. One of the paradoxes is that not only does that lead to a 10% lower life expectancy among Travellers, which is outrageous in modern Britain, but it means it is less likely that Traveller children will be vaccinated, which matters to everybody. We know about herd immunity, and if we allow that to continue and do not ensure access to our health services, we will actually harm the health of the population more generally.

We know that there are more Traveller children in care. The Travellers account for 0.1% of the population, but only 0.03% of apprenticeships go to people from the Traveller community. Some 5% of our prison population is made up of people from the travelling community, and 8% of women in New Hall Prison are from a Traveller background. I say to the Minister that we must now have some proper accounting. The NHS does not count Travellers as a community of note, and that has to change.

Alok Sharma: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that the way in which the NHS currently accounts for people is based on the breakdown in the 2001 census. He will know, however, that an ongoing piece of work in the NHS is looking at whether we can move to using the categories in the 2011 census, which includes Gypsies and Travellers.

Tony Lloyd: That is comforting, but it is six years since the census was taken. This is not a new phenomenon, and I think we really can and must do better. I know that this is not a matter for the Minister’s Department—he is in the invidious position of having to respond for the Home Office, the Department of Health, the Department for Education and so on, which is always like drawing the short straw—but he has to go back to his colleagues and say that this is simply not good enough. Proper accounting is the starting point.

It did not have to be this way; it could have been so very different. The previous Labour Government left a good legacy. The Equality Act 2010, along with subsequent case law, has made sure that Travellers are defined as a protected minority. The Housing Act 2004 provided a statutory basis for an assessment of the need for housing and caravan sites for Travellers. The periodical review of housing needs that local authorities are supposed to undertake was brought in under the previous Labour Government.

However, the Equality Act was flouted by the then Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, Sir Eric Pickles, who was guilty of unlawful discrimination when he singly picked out Gypsies, saying that any application by Gypsies for a green-belt site would need special consideration. That was unlawful, but—let us be honest—it was also unacceptable. It was unacceptable behaviour to be so discriminatory.

Why was the assessment of need removed by this Government? Will the Minister tell the House that such an assessment will now be put back in place, because it ought to be there? The periodical review has gone, and where are the 28 commitments of the ministerial

working group? Is the Minister determined, as I am, to do something to better the lives and the life chances of the Travellers? The 2016 draft guidance review of housing needs for caravans and houseboats has not been delivered in proper form. Where is it? The Minister made no mention of any of these points.

Under the affordable homes programme, £60 million was available for Travellers for Traveller sites. The Minister did not tell us how many new sites have been allocated. He did not tell us where the money is, or what it has been spent on. That matters, frankly, because I can tell the House that in the south-east, for example, only 10 of the 66 local authorities now have a five-year plan for the supply of Traveller sites. In the east and west midlands—this is of concern to my hon. Friends from the midlands—only 15 of the 70 local authorities across the whole region have a five-year supply plan.

We know that only a third of local authorities in London have completed a Traveller accommodation needs assessment. The Minister said that the Government have exhorted local authorities to complete such assessments, but only a third of London authorities have done so. In my own area, two local authorities actually believe they have no need for places for Travellers, which is not acceptable. The question is: what will the Government do about that?

Dame Caroline Spelman: The idea of a five-year supply plan in relation to an itinerant population is a difficult one. As the hon. Gentleman will have heard earlier, we have seen a doubling in the number of illegal Traveller incursions in the west midlands since 2011, and in my own green-belt constituency, which has provided 26 additional pitches, we have seen a doubling in the number of illegal travelling incursions in the past 12 months. The fundamental problem is that when we seek to move the Travellers to the new pitches, they do not want to go to them.

Tony Lloyd: I will come on to the point that the right hon. Lady makes in a few moments. Of course there is an issue with unauthorised sites. I have experienced it in my erstwhile role as a police and crime commissioner and as a constituency MP. Like many other hon. Members, I believe that the law is inadequate at the moment and that we need to look at changes.

Anecdotal evidence from local authorities suggests that those that are good—which provide sites—end up attracting the Travellers who cannot be placed elsewhere. That is a real issue because unless the power exists—it did, but the Government took it away—to insist on local authorities conforming to some credible plan, the burden falls disproportionately on the good local authority to the advantage of others.

Kate Green: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the case that he is making. He may also wish to comment on reports from friends and families of Travellers that certain rogue landlords who control sites put legitimate Traveller and Gypsy families under pressure to leave the sites, as they believe they will get more economic value from the sites if they can bring new tenants into the properties.

Tony Lloyd: My hon. Friend tells me something that I did not know and I am grateful because that should form part of the Government’s thinking.

Let me be clear: I do not countenance antisocial or illegal behaviour. Why would I, any more than anyone else? We are probably talking about 1,400 caravans that cause the problems. The Minister should not be too casual about his belief that powers exist. Sections 61 and 62 as operated by the police are not adequate because—not wrongly—they include a provision that the police have to ensure that there is a suitable, well-managed site to move Travellers to. That is a sensible provision, but it works only if such sites are available. We come back around, on this circular problem, that we can have all the powers we want but if the sites are not available, they will simply go round and round.

Andy Slaughter: My hon. Friend makes the salient point that since 2010 the Government have systematically removed both the carrot and the stick for local authorities to provide appropriate sites. Then they are puzzled by the increase in unlawful, unauthorised encampments. Is not the solution to provide sites? It is a very limited role for local authorities when broken down in that way, and then the problem would go away of its own accord.

Tony Lloyd: My hon. Friend invites one of my conclusions and I will come on to exactly that point.

James Heapey (Wells) (Con): Does the shadow Minister not accept that the problem with requiring the provision of authorised sites is that a county cannot accept unlimited liability for those sites just because it happens to be a popular place for Travellers to visit? Most local authorities have provided a reasonable number of sites, but demand exceeds supply. It cannot be down to the taxpayer to meet that demand no matter what.

Tony Lloyd: The hon. Gentleman is not right: many local authorities are not providing any sites and we need to establish that fact. If there are no sites, we will simply move people from one illegal, antisocial encampment to another, however much we operate the revolving door. That achieves nothing, and is neither rational nor fair to the communities who bear the burden of those illegal visitations.

Wera Hobhouse: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we need to include the boating community in the travelling community? Members of the boating community do not want to be moved around, but under the current provisions that is what is happening. It is important, when talking about the travelling community, that we also include the boating community, which is increasing.

Tony Lloyd: The hon. Lady makes an interesting point, and I am aware that the owners of berths are beginning to make moves against their existing tenants, which is not acceptable. If she will forgive me, the world of narrowboats and house boats is a very different one to that of Travellers, but she may have a chance to expand on her point later.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tony Lloyd: If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I will make some progress. It is only fair.

The other point I make to the Minister about the law is the disparity between private land and public land. Normally, on private land it is possible to obtain action

by bailiffs within 24 hours. With public land, that is rarely possible. Local authorities need to be under a duty to exercise a test of reasonableness, but within that it should be possible to align the actions that local authorities can take with respect to public land. Public land does not only belong to wicked councils, but may be owned by hospitals or schools. One of my hon. Friends was telling me about an incursion on to some playing fields in his constituency. It can take days and days to get any action on such incursions, and we need to look at the broad definition and bring public land into the realm of private land.

In Leeds, negotiated settlements have begun to take place. Encampments were costing some £10,000 each in local authority and policing costs. By negotiating with Travellers on stopping sites, the council has been able to establish better processes for, for example, the dumping of rubbish and the times of coming and going to the site. That has led to a significant reduction in the number of encampments and a saving of some £200,000 for the local authority and the police. That is the kind of sensible action that we should encourage.

The Minister's speech was fascinating, but it was empty of real commitment—

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): What would you do?

Tony Lloyd: The Minister has been talking for large parts of my speech, so he does not know what I would do. I talked about the need for a change in the law—not a review of the law—[*Interruption.*] I would be delighted to give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr Marcus Jones: The hon. Gentleman has mentioned on several occasions that he would like to see a change in the law. Will he say how he would like to see the law changed?

Tony Lloyd: If the Minister had been listening, he would have known that I talked about bringing private land into conjunction with public land and about making sure that the police's powers could be used more effectively. The police are frustrated. I talked about the problem of section 62 and the fact that at the moment the police have to have an alternative site.

The reality is that we have to couple the use of those powers with the investment in sites, which Conservative Members are reluctant to do. When the comment was made that Government cuts to local government had had a serious impact on the capacity to provide sites, it was met with a howl of derision from Conservative Members, who once again want to protect austerity except when it affects their constituents.

We need to see investment in sites. We need to know where the £60 million has gone from the affordable homes scheme. We need a Government who have a genuine commitment to reduce the level of discrimination in our society. I sympathise with hon. Members who face problems from antisocial and illegal behaviour by Travellers, and those should be dealt with, but—as I began by saying—the lot of many of the travelling communities is unacceptable. One Traveller says, "As a PhD student I have been treated as an oddity or as incompetent by my peers and professors." Another

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said, “I went for a cleaning job. When I told the pub owner where I lived, she said we don’t serve your sort and I won’t employ you.” I have read of someone saying to a nine-year-old child, “I’ll burn your caravan down while you sleep. Dirty thieves, you should’ve been deported, even the young one.” That was to an English-born child. When that happens, we know we have a problem. We can rail against the minority of illegal Travellers—we can and they will—but let us make sure we also deal with the real issues that affect this community which is so badly discriminated against. They are our fellow citizens and they deserve better from this House.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) has finished. He cannot give way. He has concluded with an excellent peroration. This will be a lively debate, as it should be on such an important subject, so I am afraid I have to impose an immediate time limit of seven minutes on Mr Mark Francois.

7.20 pm

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): The whole issue of Travellers is one that resonates deeply in my county of Essex, not least because of the events at Dale Farm several years ago, when Councillor Tony Ball and Basildon Council took action to uphold the law and clear one of the largest illegal Traveller encampments in the country. I note that a number of my Essex colleagues are in the House this evening: my hon. Friends the Members for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris), for Clacton (Giles Watling), for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge), for Southend West (Sir David Amess), for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe) and for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart). That shows the degree of concern among my colleagues in Essex about this issue. Indeed, I understand that you, Madam Deputy Speaker, have also had some issues in your Essex constituency with regard to Travellers. Essex is here, one way or another, in very significant numbers.

It is important to stress that many Travellers are law-abiding, but it is also true that unfortunately a minority do cause a number of problems for people in the settled community. From my own experience, we can divide these problems broadly into two categories: first, those caused by non-travelling Travellers, which I will explain in a moment; and, secondly, those caused by travelling Travellers. Non-travelling Travellers are not people who move regularly from place to place. They sometimes breach planning guidelines and regulations to develop buildings, quite often in the green belt, by laying hard core in breach of planning controls and then seeking to build properties thereafter.

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): Being a Traveller is not about the frequency with which you move. It is very remiss of the right hon. Gentleman to call people who are not moving at any given point “non-Traveller”. Being a Traveller is part of your ethnicity and I do not think it is up to him to define their ethnicity.

Mr Francois: I am just talking about Travellers who are not travelling. This is the point I am trying to make. It is sometimes a misnomer to call these people Travellers, because they are not actually travelling at all. They are merely seeking to exploit weaknesses in the planning system to try to develop properties where others cannot.

We have had exactly that problem at an area in my constituency called Hovefields in Wickford, where Travellers have attempted to do that, despite two High Court injunctions to the contrary. Travellers have recently laid many tonnes of hard core on land at Hovefields and have then sought to expand the existing area of their properties upon it. Local members of the settled community have been subject to harassment and intimidation when they have sought to protest to the council about those changes. I am sure the whole House condemns that behaviour. Basildon Council is continuing to pursue the matter through the courts, but, as the Minister will be more than well aware, the whole process of enforcement in relation to breaches of planning regulation can be very cumbersome indeed.

Andy Slaughter: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Francois: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman, who I know has a big Traveller problem in Hammersmith.

Andy Slaughter: Interesting point. The right hon. Gentleman mentioned Dale Farm. I had the opportunity to visit it twice with the late Rodney Bickerstaffe and the late Lord Avebury. I wonder whether the right hon. Gentleman has ever been there to talk to the Traveller communities. I just want to be clear that he is not making a link between someone’s ethnicity and their ability to follow planning regulations.

Mr Francois: The point I am making is that I believe all people should be equal before the law. I shall go on to explain exactly why that should apply.

Basildon Council—I spoke many times to Tony Ball, who was in charge of clearing Dale Farm—is continuing to pursue the matter through the courts. However, as the Minister knows, that can take a very long time. It is deeply frustrating to some of my constituents that they are expected to respect planning law—for instance, if they wish to build an extension to their domestic property—yet it would appear that some Travellers sometimes take little notice of the planning regulations by which others are expected to abide. What we are asking—I reiterate the point—is that all people should be equal before the law; otherwise, how can we expect to uphold the current planning regime? I therefore ask the Minister to consider—as part of the consultation, which I warmly welcome—whether anything further can be done to strengthen the enforcement powers of local authorities against such deliberate breaches of planning regulations. We all know it goes on and we all know it has been going on for years. It is about time the Government did something to try to bring this practice to an end.

The second category, the travelling Travellers, are those who do move from place to place. Some—I say again, some—of these Travellers move across the country establishing temporary encampments, quite often on public land such as car parks, other parks and open spaces.

This has been a particular problem in Essex in recent years, including in my own constituency. As the Minister said, councils have the opportunity, working with the police, to serve so-called section 61 notices to move Travellers on, but very often that just results in them moving to another public open space where the whole rigmarole starts again. The current powers available to police and local authorities do not act as a deterrent to people who wish to break the law in this way.

I understand that Ministers are now considering whether changes need to be made, and I take tonight's announcement of a consultation exercise as a very positive development. I believe we should now look across the Irish sea for a solution and adopt the Irish Government's system of making such deliberate acts of trespass a criminal offence. In fact, the Irish system is one reason why so many Traveller families from Ireland now come to the United Kingdom. By making this change, I believe that we could provide a very real deterrent to those who seek to trespass quite deliberately on public land. To echo what was said from the Opposition Benches earlier, prevention would be better than cure. I have discussed this issue on a number of occasions with Roger Hirst, our very active police, crime and fire commissioner for Essex, and can tell the House that he is also firmly in favour of adopting the so-called Irish option.

In summary—I know many Members are keen to speak—I congratulate Ministers on securing this debate and on seeking to ascertain the will of the House on this important issue. In the debate, I think Ministers will hear calls from both sides of the Chamber for something further to be done to help to reduce the problems that some Travellers sometimes cause some communities. The time for action is now. I very much hope that Ministers will listen to the House and that following the consultation—they can take this speech as a submission to it—they will finally determine to adopt the Irish option and provide the real deterrent we have needed for so long.

7.28 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to speak from the Front Bench. I did not expect to do so, but my hon. Friend the Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) has been injured. I am sure I speak on behalf of the whole House when I wish her well and a safe return to this place. I am very grateful for the opportunity to take part in the debate.

I would like to outline a bit of context and history, because those who fail to learn the lessons of history are doomed to repeat it. The first anti-Gypsy Act was passed back in the 1500s. It allowed the Crown the power to remove Gypsies from England by any violent means necessary. In 1547, Gypsies were effectively enslaved. Edward VI instituted a law that branded Gypsies with the letter "v" on their front for a period of two years of enslavement. If they escaped, they were then enslaved for life. And of course the House does not need a lecture on what happened to the Gypsy and Romani communities during the Holocaust.

While researching this debate over the recess, I read the excellent book by Katharine Quarmby, "No Place to Call Home", which I commend to the House. I would be more than happy to place a copy in the Library. I was struck by the account of the tragic murder of 15-year-old Johnny Delaney in Ellesmere Port, Cheshire. He died

on 28 May 2013 after having his head kicked in. One of the murderers, jumping on his head with both feet, said it was okay because, "He's only a Gypsy". It is important, therefore, that we approach this debate with an understanding of the context and history.

As one would expect from a Scottish nationalist Member, I want to talk about some of the challenges from a Scottish angle. The 2011 census was the first to include the option of Gypsy or Traveller as an ethnic category, and in it 4,200 people in Scotland identified as white Gypsy Travellers, although the real number is estimated to be between 15,000 and 20,000 by those who have worked with the community. In my speech, which I will keep brief because a lot of Members want to contribute, I will talk about education, health, housing, discrimination and hate crime and the media. I was disappointed that the Minister spent 20 minutes talking about enforcement, when there are clearly other issues facing the community.

On education, we know that Gypsy Travellers have some of the lowest attainment rates in Scotland: 28.1% leave school with no qualifications at SCQF level 3 or higher, compared with 1.9% among all leavers. The Scottish Traveller Education Review Group has developed guidance that went out to consultation, and the Scottish Government are currently considering the responses. I hope that the report can be implemented soon.

I want to touch on health because, as the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) outlined, some of the community's health indicators are very poor: life expectancy is 10 years lower; and mothers within the community are 20 times more likely to have experienced the death of a child. That is a staggering figure and one that the House should reflect upon. There is a lack of cultural awareness and understanding among medical professionals, so it is important that the Royal College of General Practitioners is developing a toolkit on commissioning for socially excluded families. I hope that that can be developed further.

Much of this debate has centred on housing. Only seven of Scotland's 32 local authorities do not provide a council site for Gypsy Travellers, including my own in the city of Glasgow, which closed its last council camp in 2009 because of a lack of demand. Scottish councils provide approximately 500 pitches across 32 sites. The sizes vary from fewer than 10 pitches to up to 30, and I am glad to see that guidance has been issued to local authorities to find some way of allowing these people to stay in traditional safe communities.

The House is more than aware that Gypsy Travellers want to live on private sites, which can help to support their independence, self-sufficiency and security, because too often they face difficulties with the planning system. It is incumbent on us as politicians to work with them, but I am afraid that some of the tone in this debate so far seems to suggest that we are working against them and that we see them as the opposition. Considering the context and the history I just outlined, that is deeply worrying.

I want to touch on discrimination and hate crime. Media coverage, in particular, is overwhelmingly negative. An Amnesty-commissioned report in 2012 considered the media treatment of Scottish Gypsy Travellers. It stated:

"Amnesty...is concerned at the wealth of evidence showing discrimination against Scottish Gypsy Travellers and the hostility and divisions between Scottish Gypsy Traveller and settled communities."

[David Linden]

It considered several studies and 190 media articles over a four-month period: 48%—nearly half—painted a negative picture of the Gypsy Traveller community, while only 28%—less than a third—were positive. The most shocking figure, however, was that only 6% presented a community voice, so only on very few occasions was the community given the right to reply. I do not think we would accept that in any other walk of life, but somehow in the media it seems to be acceptable.

It is incumbent on politicians and the media to be careful with their language. I was disappointed over the summer recess, therefore, when the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross), during an interview—a fairly quick-fire interview, I do accept—said that if he were Prime Minister for one day his priority would be tougher enforcement on Gypsies and Travellers because they were a blight on our communities. Amnesty was right to call it inflammatory language.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con) *rose*—

David Linden: If the hon. Gentleman wants to intervene, I am more than happy to allow him to put his apology on the record in the House.

Douglas Ross: First, I want to clarify this point for the official record: I did not say: “because they are a blight on our communities”. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will reflect on the words he has added. I also said, many times afterwards, that this issue affects my constituents in Moray and constituents across the whole UK, and in many cases it is people in the settled communities who feel ignored because their voice is never heard in these debates.

David Linden: I am disappointed that the hon. Gentleman is seeking to reopen this issue. [Interruption.] Will the House calm down for a minute? His apology on Radio Scotland was welcome, but he is on the record as saying before that they are a blight on local communities, which is deeply regrettable. I am glad that he has apologised.

Douglas Ross: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) has now said twice that I said on the record that travelling communities are a blight on their areas. I did not say that, as I mentioned in my intervention on him. Can you do something to stop him telling these untruths?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I think you have just done it yourself. I think you just corrected the record. We need not worry.

David Linden: I am sad that the debate has descended to this level. If the hon. Gentleman is not happy, I am sure his constituents will be more than happy to Google it.

It is important that we as legislators moderate our language. Some Conservative Members would do well to do that. Gypsy Travellers have suffered enough discrimination, so it is important that we come together, understand our differences and learn from history. The inclusion of a Gypsy, Roma and Traveller history month

would be a very good way of reflecting on that, so I support that idea, but I return to my original point: those of us who fail to learn the lessons of history are doomed to repeat it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: We now come to Sir Paul Beresford, with a five-minute limit.

7.36 pm

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): That is discrimination, Mr Deputy Speaker! I will have to talk extremely quickly.

I thank the Minister for offering us this consultation and for expanding it to take in ideas and solutions. Surrey, and Mole Valley in particular, has had considerable and unpleasant experience of Travellers. Most are not Romani Gypsies. Most have very strong Irish accents. My right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) might have given us an explanation of why. For simplicity, I divide them into three groups—he divided them into two—the first being those who use legitimate sites. They are law-abiding. They utilise the education service; they go to schools. They use the national health service. They are part of our community.

The second group are those who buy land on the green belt, squat on it, bring community disharmony and exhibit aggressive abuse of the planning system, acting as if, while it applies to the settled community, they are above it. I have two particularly notorious sites in the Mole Valley. Both are on green belt and both groups abuse the planning system by making retrospective applications. We then get appeal, generally at the last minute, followed by reapplication, followed by rejection, followed by re-application, followed by refusal, followed by appeal, and so on. Both groups blatantly use the presence of children as reasons to reject the legal orders obtained by local authorities for their removal from the sites.

Relationships with local communities are fractious at best and often punctuated with verbal threats and threats to the surrounding communities. I have received a few myself. One site is on inherited land. The other was bought with cash, from whatever source. At the weekend, people arrived with caravans, trucks, bulldozers, loads of rubble, piping, electrical wiring and so on. By the end of Sunday, they had installed an electricity supply and tapped into a water supply, whether legally or not. Electric gates on pillars suitable for a garish stately home were put in. Then the nonsense started: hopeless applications, refusals, appeals, more refusals, more appeals. In the case of the gates, this has been continuing for 14 years, and looks set to continue for several more at least. We now have a review, and I ask the Minister to look at that case in particular. I would be delighted to come along and explain to him the difficulties.

The third group consists of the true Travellers on whom we have been concentrating this evening, who are an expensive menace to my local authorities, parish councils and farmers. This year Surrey has been particularly plagued by groups who descend on open land that contains community grounds, school grounds, farmland and so on. Fortunately—I am a member of the National Farmers Union—the farming community is becoming quite adept at prevention.

Those groups have been taking anything between one and 30 caravans, plus associated vehicles. They descend on the site and squat. Civil action to remove them can take between days and weeks, and is very expensive, especially for some of Surrey's little parish councils. When they have eventually been removed by expensive bailiffs, the sites are generally disgusting, featuring everything from food waste to children's soiled nappies and worse. Returning them to a decent condition involves added expense.

As I have said, I should be delighted to visit the Minister, with one or two of the helpers who have to deal with all this, to advise him on how we feel that the law should be changed. I am particularly in favour of the change in the law suggested by my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), who proposed that we should adopt the Irish example. We should extend it by not only making this a criminal offence, but giving the police the power to require the people whom they approach on the sites to prove who they are. The biggest problems for the police at present are the giving of "Mickey Mouse" names and the fact that enforcement is extremely difficult. I should love to come and see the Minister—and he is faintly nodding, so I will take that as a yes.

7.41 pm

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I shall breach the normal partisan rules of the House and say that the Minister of State made what I thought was an excellent speech, in which he balanced the humanity that should inform us all with the frustration and annoyance that affect so many of our constituents. I felt that he spoke very well indeed, and that his words were matched by those of my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd).

May I home in on what we are actually talking about this evening? We are discussing Gypsies and Travellers and the impact on local communities. I think we have accepted that 76% of the people who identified themselves in the census as members of the travelling community are in fact resident, but it is other people about whom we are talking. I will not stigmatise them by saying that they are of a particular ethnicity or origin, or that one can tell where they come from by their accents, because I do not like that. Everyone in the Chamber knows what we are talking about here. Let us talk about the people who are having an impact on our constituents, because they are the people who have chosen to live outside the law. To live outside the law you must be honest, and the problem is that people who are living outside the law are causing great distress and great pain.

It breaks my heart that many of us who are of Irish origin or have Irish backgrounds feel that, in many respects, we are stigmatised by the association with Irish Travellers, when the truth is much more than that. Ealing does not contain verdant fields and great open spaces where the lowing herd winds slowly o'er the lea and the plowman homeward plods his weary way, but we experience regular incursions by Travellers.

Matt Western: In contrast, we have a lot of greenery around us in Warwick and Leamington, and the summer saw a significant rise in the number of communities setting themselves up in the constituency. The authorities

are under huge pressure, and I really feel for them, because they are hamstrung by the planning laws as they stand. They are also not aided—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. The hon. Gentleman must sit down. This is an intervention, and interventions are meant to be very short. A great many Members wish to speak, so I cannot allow people to make speeches in the form of interventions.

Stephen Pound: I take the point made by my hon. Friend. I think that many of us feel the same irritation.

As I was saying, Ealing is not blessed with huge open spaces, but the open spaces that we have tend to be public parks, school playing fields, sports fields and golf courses, every one of which has suffered from a Traveller incursion in the last few years. It is not as if Ealing is one of the boroughs that say, "We will have no Travellers." It is not a borough that sets its face against people who have every right to identify themselves as having a certain ethnicity. We have a caravan site. Every time there is an unauthorised encampment in the borough, we investigate the status of the children to establish whether they are receiving education and what their health conditions are. We do not try to shove people off without a second thought. Nevertheless, between 2012 and this summer there have been 140 illegal occupations in the London borough of Ealing, the majority of which have been on council land.

I have had interactions with the travelling community since the mid-1970s, as a housing officer, as a housing association officer, as a councillor, and even as a mayor and a Member of Parliament. I entirely accept that there are some who will approach you when they move on to the land and say, "I am the guy in charge: if you have any problems, come and see me." Others, however, will commit the most ghastly antisocial behaviour, such as throwing stones at cars, and a couple of weeks ago there were some horses at a petrol station on the A40. That is cruelty to the horses, but it is also pretty appalling for the people who live in the area.

There are some who take things too far in the wrong direction, and worst of all are those who use the encampment for fly-tipping. There is no more heart-breaking sight than a sports field where a group of amateur footballers have been trying to get together to play football—to bring people together for the good of the community—and there is a 2-metre-deep pile of asbestos-ridden household waste that costs us a fortune to clear up. Let me give the House a rough idea of what that means. The legal costs alone in the London borough of Ealing between June 2016 and the present time were more than £200,000, and officer time amounted to more than £130,000. Our borough is not swimming in cash. I doubt that any Member in the Chamber represents a constituency that has more money than it knows what to do with, but our clear-up costs amounted to £250,000.

These are not really encampments. They are, in fact, illegal businesses. I pay tribute to Ealing council officers such as Yasmin Basterfield, Chris Bunting, Jess Murray and Paul Murphy—not the other Paul Murphy; the one in Ealing—who do an incredible amount of work with their teams. However, we do not have the confidence of the local community that we can sufficiently address this issue. What happens is that, suddenly, a great glistening cavalcade of chromium-plated 4x4s—if only

[Stephen Pound]

it were a caravanserai!—roars down and sets up an encampment on our open space, and then the problems start.

In the brief time that remains to me, I shall ask the Minister four basic questions, to which I want to hear four answers. Section 61 has been mentioned, and section 61 is not good enough. It needs to be enforced properly. What guidance will the Minister give his right hon. Friend the Home Secretary about a protocol to enforce it? Why cannot legal advisers in magistrates courts sign the warrants over the weekend? Will the Minister at least speak to the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, who is present, to establish whether the Ministry of Justice can do something about that? Every vehicle that arrives can be identified through a registration number. Why can those numbers not be used to identify the people who are responsible for the crime, and then prosecute them? What could possibly be wrong with that?

Finally, could we have a few bob from the Government for the unanticipated costs of clearing up? Frankly, it is crippling us in the London borough of Ealing.

7.47 pm

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): Throughout August this year, I was contacted by a large number of constituents who were concerned about the illegal encampment of Travellers. Travellers had broken into and occupied parkland near Stoke Gifford in my constituency, and then—having been successfully evicted from there—occupied another site in nearby Patchway.

Having considered the issue in some depth over the summer, I believe that there are failings in three key areas: provision of pitches and transit sites, enforcement and oversight. I shall deal with the last of those first, because I am convinced that the current lack of oversight is the root cause of many of the problems exemplified by the issue in my constituency.

Three separate Government Departments—the Department for Communities and Local Government, the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice—have a stake in the problem of illegal encampments and the powers to prevent and remove them. Those powers themselves are then split between councils, as a planning issue, and the police, as a matter of trespass and public order. At least five public bodies are therefore connected with the situation in some way. Of course I applaud sensible and practical localism, but central Government must not abrogate their duty to assist local authorities.

In an immediate response to the incidents in my constituency, I submitted written questions to two of the Departments involved. I feel that the responses of both Departments underline the current belief of central Government that illegal encampments are purely a local issue. The Home Office, quite properly, restated that

“The decision on when and whether to use police powers is an independent operational decision for the police.”

While it is not up to the Home Secretary to directly command the police operationally, I am sure that my constituents will be concerned to learn that no national guidance is available to chief constables about the circumstances in which it is appropriate to use their existing powers to remove illegal encampments.

Similarly, the Department for Communities and Local Government confirmed:

“The Government has made no estimates”

of transit sites for Travellers, as these are a planning responsibility for local authorities. Again, that is strictly correct, but is it sensible Government policy to perform no central planning or analysis of how local authorities are performing in their responsibility to provide transit sites?

There is evidence in these responses of a total lack of oversight of or concern about the problem from central Government. My constituents will no doubt be baffled to learn that a problem as mobile as illegal Traveller encampments is not monitored at a central level but considered a purely local issue. If we are to resolve the other problems that my constituents’ experience has revealed, we must begin with the Government taking a greater leadership role in tackling these problems.

The current legislation on illegal encampments dates back to 1994—the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act—and, as I have outlined, there is no real way for any of the Departments concerned to be sure that the current arrangements are working for our constituents, and nor does there appear to be effective guidance to police forces on the circumstances in which it is appropriate to use their powers. The result is not sensible localism, but a postcode lottery. Section 61 of the 1994 Act is clear that should any damage to property or land occur, the police are empowered to compel trespassers to vacate land that they have already been asked to leave. That did not occur in either Stoke Gifford or Patchway, and it was left to the council to undertake enforcement action through the courts.

The police have existing powers to enforce the law. For example, a very senior councillor with public service spanning five decades—30 years as a police officer and almost 20 years as a councillor—Councillor Brian Allinson, who is also a very good friend of mine, informed me that a fellow councillor suffered some pretty horrific abuse and threats. As a former police officer, Councillor Allinson was shocked that there seemed to be no follow-up or further action by the police. He pointed out that, when he served in the police force, that would have been considered a serious threat against the person and tackled with the due consideration it merited. I am still waiting to meet the chief constable and the police and crime commissioner to discuss the full circumstances of the incidents, but the police, with Home Office guidance, must be properly prepared to enforce the law to deal with illegal encampments where crime and disorder has taken place.

As has already been said, prevention is better than cure. I am pleased that South Gloucestershire Council recognises in its local plan that

“the presence of a transit site...can speed up enforcement action”

However, the same plan also notes that the site must be within the same local authority area as the land affected for the police to gain extra powers.

Again, it is clear that this is not just a local problem; there is a lack of central Government help and a lack of effective legislation. I urge South Gloucestershire Council to re-examine the provision of transit sites after these recent incidents, but the first move must come from the Departments in ensuring that the police are enforcing the law of the land without fear or favour.

7.52 pm

Mr Geoffrey Robinson (Coventry North West) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) sought to leave the Minister with two impressions: one was a series of four questions—we all look forward to the answers—and the other was a compliment on his speech. I am afraid that I cannot agree with my hon. Friend, because I thought the speech lacked any ministerial intent to do anything about this problem.

The problem is increasing across the country, particularly in the west midlands and certainly in Coventry, which I have represented for a few years now. Over the past five years, the number of illegal encampments—I stress that I am talking only about the illegal encampments—has doubled. We are facing an irritant that is causing real problems and that, in the end, will breed exactly the sort of prejudice, bias and racial discrimination that the previous Labour Government sought to prevent through legislation, which I approved of. The simple fact is that the problem is coming back and it is corrosive, and the whole Gypsy and Traveller community is being affected as a result, which is totally wrong because we are talking about a small percentage, but the illegal occupation of these encampments is increasing.

The Government's response leaves a lot to be desired. When we look at what they have done, we see that the previous Secretary of State, under the coalition Government, was convicted in the High Court for racial discrimination. We have seen the Government remove from local authorities the statutory obligation to at least carry out a census of the arrangements in place for sites in their areas. It is a pattern of disengagement from the problem, which we all face. It is not just the large metropolitan areas, such as the west midlands, because we have heard Conservative Members refer to county councils across the country making representations.

I say this to the Minister: for goodness' sake, show some ministerial authority, concern and drive to sort this problem out. What have we had instead? We have had a promise that there will be a consultation. Nobody could be against consultation—we can even warmly welcome it, as the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) did. He said that it was the greatest thing he had ever heard, and the next minute he said that the time for action is now. Well, the time for action has been kicked into the long grass. The Minister does not need a consultation to answer the four questions. He does not have the answers, but he could find them. That is what I urge him to do tonight, and this is the brunt of what I want to say.

Stephen Pound: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Robinson: No, my hon. Friend has had a good go already and other Members wish to speak. My hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) wants to contribute, for example.

The Minister has had an offer—it is unprecedented, in my experience—from the West Midlands police and crime commissioner to get into a dialogue about specifics, because we need action or legislation from the Government, not consultation. That, together with a bit of money here and there, could make a big difference—we can never solve this problem—in reducing the frequency and intensity of these encampments. That is what we are looking for: action, not words, though, yes, consultation will allow us all to play our part.

The Minister has offered us a meeting. If I was in his position, I would have asked for that meeting: “Come in and let's see what we can do together.” We now speak as a combined authority in the west midlands, as many hon. Friends will do this evening. We can offer the cross-county and cross-borough co-operation that the Minister is looking for, but we need a lead from the Government that they want action in this area, and a bit of money would make all the difference. For goodness' sake, get going and, while the consultation is ongoing, devise a plan of action to implement the decisions afterwards. We have been waiting for the final draft of the guidance to local authorities for months, and the draft that was produced was virtually acceptable. Put an end to this drift and disengagement, get a grip and show yourself to be a Minister by doing something about it.

7.57 pm

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): Not surprisingly, the calling of this debate has stimulated considerable interest in my constituency, from constituents, the local councils, the police and the media. As we heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), this is a hot topic in south Essex. Indeed, in the run-up to the general election, I wrote to the Prime Minister's policy adviser, asking that further measures be included in the forthcoming manifesto, because quite frankly the public are fed up. They are fed up that the same rules do not appear to apply equally to all members of society, whatever their cultural background. That is what we are talking about: illegal activity perpetrated in the main by Travellers. This is not about discrimination or attacking someone's culture, way of life or traditions; this is about all of us playing by the same rules and abiding by the same law, having the law applied to us equitably and all taking responsibility for our actions in the same way.

I have a page here listing some horror stories of recent incidents, but unfortunately I do not have time to go through them. However, I want to thank the local councillors whom I have worked with over the past few years to tackle these issues. In particular, I want to thank Councillors Tony Ball and Phil Turner, both former leaders of Basildon Council, Rob Gledhill, the leader of Thurrock Council, and Gavin Callaghan, current chairman of Basildon's policy and resources committee.

I accept that the travelling community faces many challenges, as described in the various briefings that have been circulating, and that no one should be subjected to hate speech or hate crime. Equally, however, it is reasonable that the settled community can expect the law to be applied evenly. As we have heard, following the clearance of Dale Farm, which was a success, unfortunately both Basildon and Thurrock Councils have been on the frontline in trying to tackle the seemingly endless unauthorised encampments. In south Essex, we have had some success, particularly in Thurrock, with the new conservative leader of Thurrock Council regularly seen at evictions, where the police were robustly enforcing section 61. Unfortunately, he tells me that that was last year; this year, there is greater reluctance to enforce section 61. One of the key reasons, he suggests, is that the guidance for the police has shifted emphasis from “or”s—breaches of this, that “or” the other—to “and”s. It is thus almost impossible to apply section 61, except

[Stephen Metcalfe]

in the most extreme cases. He also highlights one of the key problems: when the legislation was drafted, it did not clarify how far an encampment would have to move. Ridiculously, we end up with encampments moving only a very short distance and the whole process starting again. That needs to be looked at—I want that distance to be measured not in metres, but in miles.

Finally, we need to change the guidance on criminality before and during these encampments. At present, perhaps rightly, collective responsibility for criminal damage—whether the cutting of padlocks or the removal of gates—cannot be applied as a group enters a site; for an offence, an individual and evidence need to be available. However, again, a simple change to the current legislation to amend the wording so that it says, “Where criminal damage has occurred and unauthorised persons have entered public land” would allow the police to act more quickly. In the same vein, we have to be realistic about what happens on these sites—the amount of environmental damage. We need to consider how we can hold the collective responsible for the clean-up, which often runs into many tens of thousands of pounds.

We have tried. We have worked with the current legislation, engaged with the police, encouraged greater enforcement, worked with the Essex Countywide Traveller Unit and used the courts, but frankly that is not working. I accept that the law is blind, but the public are not—they want action and they want it now. All I am trying to do is level the playing field. We need not only a few tweaks to existing legislation but a change in the law as identified by my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford.

Calling for Ministers to adopt the so-called Irish option of criminalising deliberate acts of trespass such as those that we see frequently in south Essex is a sensible move and it has my 100% backing. I do not believe that it criminalises a way of life or is discriminatory; it criminalises an activity—unauthorised encampments and trespass. I look forward very much to hearing the Minister’s views on tweaks and changes to the law.

8.2 pm

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): I want to make a few points about illegal Traveller encampments and the impact they have on constituencies such as mine.

I should say at the outset that I do not accuse the whole Traveller community of taking part in illegal encampments or in pitching caravans where they should not; I am sure that many do not do that and are frustrated with the reputational damage done when it happens. But that does happen, and it causes significant anger and frustration in the community when it does. In my constituency, illegal encampments are regularly set up on common land, waste ground, car parks and even public parks. The Travellers move on to a site. If they do not move when requested, the council can apply for a court order, which typically takes one to two weeks and also, of course, incurs legal costs for the local authority. When the Travellers eventually move on, there are usually significant clean-up costs.

Wolverhampton City Council tells me that it has to go through this process 10 to 20 times a year. Adding legal costs and clean-up costs together, it says that it

typically costs £10,000 to £15,000 a time to deal with an illegal encampment—that is 10 to 20 times a year in just one local authority. There was recently an illegal encampment in land off Prouds Lane in Bilston in my constituency. In May this year, the small fence protecting the land was driven through for the caravans to get on; there were upwards of a dozen caravans there. Residents were understandably angry at this trespass on to the land. The council applied for the court order. When the Travellers eventually went after about 10 days, they left huge piles of rubbish around the site. The council moved very quickly to clear the rubbish, and I commend it for its swift and effective action. Although the council moved as quickly and effectively as it could, afterwards my constituents asked questions about the legal costs involved and why local council tax payers should have to pay them.

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (Saffron Walden) (Con): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the costs are for not only local councils but many private residents and landowners, who have to spend their own money to clean up and deal with the issue of illegal encampments? One of my constituents has written to me about spending £3,000 a week on the problem.

Mr McFadden: The hon. Lady makes a good point: the costs are often private as well as public.

My constituents also asked about the costs of the clean-up and, again, why local council tax payers should have to pay them. They asked what could be done to secure the site from a repeat of the experience and who would pay for that.

When the Travellers eventually moved from Prouds Lane, they went to East Park—I mean right in the middle of the public park in the East Park area. My constituents watched their public asset being abused by an illegal encampment. That pattern repeats itself over and over again in many parts of the black country and, as we have heard, many other parts of the country, too. As we speak, another illegal encampment has been set up on the Bilston Urban Village site in my constituency. The council is wearily going through the same legal process of trying to get it removed.

Given the repeated pattern of what is happening, it is clear that the current system is not working properly: it is too cumbersome, it takes too long and it is too costly. I would like the Minister to consider two questions. I welcome the consultation, but it cannot just be about current powers. First, will it address what legal changes can be made to give councils and the police the power to move these encampments much more quickly than at present?

Secondly, what more can be done to ensure that those responsible for the clean-up bill actually pay it, rather than it being left to local residents to pay? We should remember that the costs involved are not only the legal and clean-up costs, but the ongoing costs—for example, of taking preventive measures such as the installation of bollards and fences all around the black country. Local residents will argue, with some justification, that if they parked their car in the wrong place, they would be fined, and that if they did not pay the fine, it would escalate along with the legal process. Yet that does not seem to happen in these cases.

The law dealing with these matters is not fit for purpose. It takes too long and imposes costs on the law abiding public, not those who have broken the law. There appears to be little or no disincentive to setting up illegal encampments. Those who do so know that there will be a delay before the council gets its court order and they are rarely forced to pay for the costs arising from their dumped rubbish. The law gives them no incentive to stop the behaviour.

Allowing the situation to continue is resulting in costs piling up for local authorities and local taxpayers. It also corrodes public trust in law enforcement. Most importantly, it is not working because the pattern of illegal encampments is continuing. Although we do not have a vote on a substantive motion tonight, I hope the Minister does not just listen and forget what has been said. I hope the Government will come forward soon with proposals to strengthen the law to make enforcement faster and easier for councils and the police.

8.8 pm

James Heapey (Wells) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden), with whom I very much agree. I am delighted that we have time this evening for this important debate, and I thank Sedgemoor and Mendip District Councils and Somerset County Council for the enthusiasm with which they provided me with information for my contribution. That tells us something about how big an issue this is for them. It is also an issue of real importance for my constituents, who have been angered again and again by illegal encampments.

In the past two years, there have been illegal encampments in Berrow, Street and routinely in the car parks and sports club of Burnham-on-Sea. There have been illegal encampments in Shepton Mallet and Brean as well as the more “permanent” Traveller sites with dubious planning status at Pilton, Theale, Cross and Wick—and, until recently, Rodney Stoke.

There is a sense that there is one rule for the travelling community and one rule for everyone else. I want to share some quick examples of illegal encampments with the House, to draw out some points about their cost and the frustration of local communities and councils.

In June, just before the Glastonbury festival, there was an illegal encampment near the festival site in Shepton Mallet. Mendip District Council moved as quickly as it could to initiate legal proceedings, but it still took 10 days, and even then, when the Travellers were being escorted out of the town, they tried to break into the local park to reoccupy that instead. The cost to the Travellers of their time in the town was absolutely nothing. The cost to Mendip District Council was £27,745, and that does not include the policing costs of trying to escort them out of the town at the end of that illegal encampment.

In Burnham-on-Sea, at the Pier Street car park, the Travellers know exactly how long they can stay. They come back again and again—often it is different groups of Travellers—and every time Sedgemoor District Council has to initiate the legal process, at a cost of £355, plus the cost of staff and solicitors’ fees. To make things fair, when the Travellers are in the car park, the council suspends car parking charges for everybody else. That is great for those shopping in the town, but it means lost revenue for the council.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): That did not happen in my constituency, where we had the farce of people parking in the car park and receiving fines—these were legal motorists—which I then had to get overturned by the council. That again emphasises that there is one rule for one and another rule for another.

James Heapey: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. Indeed, that was exactly what happened when we had the very first occupation in Burnham-on-Sea. Traffic wardens were giving tickets to those who had parked legally but overrun, while the Travellers were allowed to be there without penalty. We are talking about the main tourist car park for what is—I can say this now that my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) has left the Chamber—Somerset’s premier seaside resort. The presence of an illegal encampment in that car park—especially one right next door to the coach park, which is an important part of our town’s business—creates entirely the wrong first impression, may well lose us business and certainly costs local businesses nearby, and that is without mentioning the clean-up costs that the local council incurs as well.

In the nearby village of Berrow, there was a Traveller encampment on the village green. Given the mess that the green was left in afterwards, Berrow chose as a village to spend quite a large proportion of its annual precept on building a bund all the way around the green. I question whether money that is hard earned by parish councils should be spent on preventing illegal activity rather than on more positive improvements for the community altogether.

I should also mention that there have routinely been encampments on private land up in Brean, a popular tourism destination, which means that businesses that contribute enormously to our local economy are left holding the baby and are responsible for bringing in the bailiffs and moving those Travellers on. Additionally, Somerset County Council has told me that in the last three years it has spent nearly £25,000 on moving Travellers on from the public highway and a further £6,000 on the clean-up costs afterwards. At every turn, there is an asymmetric cost—a cost to councils, Avon and Somerset police, local businesses and the community, but no cost whatsoever to the Travellers who have made the illegal encampment.

The argument is that illegal encampments are an issue only if there is inadequate provision of authorised sites, but there are 64 authorised pitches in Somerset. In Bath and North East Somerset and in North Somerset, the two adjoining local authorities, there are a further 50, so there are 114 pitches available in the county of Somerset. How many can the taxpayer be expected to provide? We live in a beautiful part of the world, with a good local economy, but surely our liability for Travellers cannot be unlimited or set simply by Traveller demand. We must be willing to say what is a fair provision for councils to offer. We must reduce costs to local authorities or find a way to pass them on to the Travellers who are illegally encamped.

We must ensure that the process is quicker, so that we end this cat-and-mouse game, whereby the Travellers understand exactly how long they can stay, stay for exactly that long and then move on before they incur any cost, while the council has incurred all the cost in the process. The Irish option, which a number of colleagues

[James Heapey]

have discussed this evening, is well worth looking at. We must ensure that the rules are fair for both the travelling and the settled communities. There can no longer be one law for the Travellers and another for everyone else.

8.14 pm

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): I have no criticism at all of the law-abiding majority who live by the rules and make a positive contribution to our communities, but I am here today to speak up on behalf of residents in Dudley, who have had to put up with illegal and antisocial camps this summer, as in previous years.

Parks and public open spaces have all been used for illegal encampments. Gates have been broken and bollards removed to access the sites. Residents and their kids have been unable to use community facilities and parks. Vehicles have been driven in a dangerous and antisocial way, destroying the environment and putting local people at risk, as well as the Travellers and their children. Some of the sites have been left with huge amounts of rubbish and waste, including in some cases, unbelievably, human waste in children's play areas. This is completely unacceptable, and I want the council and the police to be able to deal with such sites much more quickly. I also want the council to take much stronger measures to prevent them from being occupied in the first place.

Earlier, I mentioned the work done on this by our police and crime commissioner, David Jamieson, who is urging MPs to back stronger powers to tackle unauthorised Traveller encampments. In place of the vague talk of reviews and all the rest of it, he has concrete proposals, which I hope a group of MPs and the PCC will be able to come and talk to Ministers about.

For example, at the moment the police can only direct difficult travelling groups to a transit site within a council area. Council borders are administrative, and a change in the law to allow the police to direct groups to transit sites in the wider area would be fairer and more effective. Our PCC believes that banning those responsible for repeated criminal activity from the whole of the area for specified short periods would be a serious deterrent, because there is currently no easy way to stop an antisocial group travelling between and within each local council area until it is moved on. Indeed, for a number of the parks subject to such activity in my constituency this summer, it was just one group being moved from one site to another, a few hundred yards or half a mile away. The process repeated itself throughout the summer, at enormous cost and hassle for local people, the council and the police.

Our PCC is calling for better protection for businesses and private land by changing the law to protect private landowners from being repeat victims of unauthorised encampments. He also wants sanctions made available for groups that return to the same private land and reductions in the time taken for evictions. He believes that injunctions should be available to cover larger areas than the specific individual site covered at the moment. Finally, he believes there should be more temporary or transient sites made available—Dudley actually has permanent sites available for the travelling community—so that Travellers can be moved on more quickly from local community facilities.

I accept, as I said at the outset, that it is a minority of the travelling community who cause problems, and I am sure that it is just as frustrating for the majority. However, it is my job to speak up for people in Dudley who have been affected by these camps. What my constituents have had to put up with this summer, as in previous years, is completely and utterly unacceptable, and they and I want tougher and swifter action to deal with them.

8.18 pm

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin), who is a fellow west midlands MP. Indeed, there seems to be a strong west midlands-Warwickshire theme running through this debate, and I am delighted that the Minister responding is a west midlands Member of Parliament and will understand the issues.

We have seen plenty of those issues in my constituency of Rugby, particularly on eastern side, close to the urban area of Coventry. One of the reasons why the problem occurs is that the market for those in the travelling community is based in that urban community. They are not often able to settle in the urban community and are on the urban fringe. One of the issues in Warwickshire is that we have been able to provide enough Traveller pitches. Very often, therefore, when an encampment is moved on, the authority has been able to demonstrate sufficient provision.

We have had incidents where pitches do exist but the group of Travellers being moved on are not willing to go on to vacant pitches because they are not able to get on with those already occupying the site. That certainly seems to be one problem. We have had great support from our police and crime commissioner in Warwickshire, Philip Seccombe, who has recently implemented new protocols, building on the work being done in the west midlands.

I want to focus on abuses of the planning system, making reference to three examples. The first relates to the number of encampments set up on the Friday before a bank holiday, with the travelling community knowing that the enforcement officer will not be at work on the Monday and so they have a longer period in which to get these developments done and entrenched. In my area, they have often done this on a site straddling two local authorities, creating issues of ownership and who the lead authority to deal with the situation would be.

The second example relates to what happens when sites are then approved, often on a temporary consent. In Barnacle, in my constituency, a number of subsequent temporary consents have been given; temporary consents of two years have been given on three or four occasions. Each time that happens, the settled community believes that the site is becoming more permanent and it has concerns.

The third thing I wish to draw attention to is the manipulation of protections within the green belt. The national planning policy framework defines previously developed land, with a presumption in favour of development, as land on which there was previously a permanent structure, but that presumption does not apply where land is occupied by an agricultural or forestry building. That exemption does not apply in respect of an equestrian building, and a number of instances that have taken place around the village of Wolvey in my constituency have been drawn to my

attention by Councillor Adrian Warwick of Warwickshire County Council and Councillor Chris Pacey-Day of Rugby Borough Council. In these examples, a number of equestrian buildings have been built, with double glazing and insulation, and have been used as stables for a period of time, but with the clear intention that at some future point an application for a residence might be made. Such applications have been made, with Rugby Borough Council, as the local authority, turning one down only for it to be granted by the Planning Inspectorate. The planning officers at the borough council have drawn my attention to this loophole, telling me that it could easily be dealt with by adding the word “equestrian” to the appropriate annexe to the NPPF. I ask the Minister whether he and his officials might look at that loophole and exemption, to circumvent the approach that is being made by a number of people. I am not suggesting that these applications are always made by people from the Gypsy and Traveller community, but they are being made in those areas where there are substantial incursions into the green belt by Gypsy and Traveller sites. I hope that the Minister will examine that issue.

I take the point made by many hon. Members that at the heart of this debate is a concept of fairness and a belief, often held rightly, that some members of the travelling community are able to take advantage of and subvert planning rules that govern the remainder of us. We therefore need a tightening of planning controls so that we do not get so many retrospective applications, we do not end up with a surfeit of multiple temporary consents and we do not have the abuse of the building of stables on land in the green belt.

8.23 pm

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): As a Labour MP, it is rare that I find myself in agreement with the Prime Minister, but last year, in her first speech upon taking office, she talked of the need to tackle burning injustices, and when I was elected in June I made a pledge to my constituents that I would work to tackle inequalities and injustices in our society. Healthcare occupies a special place in our country, but universal care cannot simply adopt a universal approach. In our communities, it is often the case that those with the greatest health needs are those least likely to access NHS services. Gypsies, Roma and Travellers are more than twice as likely as others to suffer from a long-term health condition, their infant mortality rates are high and, most worryingly, the suicide rate among Irish Travellers is six times higher than that of the wider population.

The GRT communities have unique and significant healthcare needs, and our NHS services should be intelligent and flexible enough to meet their needs. However, research published last month by the Traveller Movement highlighted the difficulties many Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities face when accessing healthcare. In this place, Members often speak out against the unfairness of postcode lotteries, but rarely do we speak of the injustices faced by those who have no postcode at all. NHS guidance states that being unable to provide proof of address should not be a barrier to accessing health services, yet far too many Travellers find themselves unable to register with a GP or access other local health services. Without access to GP services, families are unable to access even the most basic treatments of the NHS; we could be talking about a mother being unable

to access adequate antenatal care, young parents struggling to obtain vaccinations for their children, someone in a mental health crisis or older generations being left without the medication they need to manage their long-term conditions. This denial of access to NHS services simply is not good enough, and the Government must work with NHS England to communicate more clearly to frontline healthcare providers that they cannot refuse to register GRT people for “no fixed abode”.

Decisions taken about healthcare are strongest and most effective when they are based on medical evidence and data. NHS England still does not include Gypsies, Roma and Travellers as a defined ethnic group in its data collection, but I welcome the Minister’s comments in this debate that that is being explored. Inclusion in NHS data collection could be the start of a transformation in healthcare for GRT communities. Not only would it enable national comparisons to be made, but it could improve local authorities’ understanding of these groups and enable much better representation of GRT needs in their joint strategic needs assessments. That is the first step in starting to address these stark health inequalities.

Recording data will be a welcome step forward, but recording alone will not be enough. Improving information sharing across the NHS and among other public services is key to improving access for Gypsies, Roma and Travellers, especially given their complex health needs and high levels of mobility. This is not about singling out Travellers, or even isolating them, by creating dedicated services—that is not what GRT communities want. All they ask is for the same access to the high-quality NHS services we have all come to expect and that everyone deserves.

The Government talk a good game on tackling burning injustices, but to say that their actions were lukewarm at best would still be generous. They may have their own community and cultural identity, but Gypsies, Roma and Travellers are as much a part of our wider community and society as anyone else, and that needs to be recognised. Instead of demonising, ostracising and alienating Travellers, the Government should be engaging with the communities to better integrate them into society and public services.

I want to live in a society in which differences in culture, belief and tradition are accepted. Our diversity gives us strength. I do not want to live in a society in which differences in health outcomes are tolerated. The health inequalities faced by GRT communities need to be measured, analysed and tackled head-on to remove the injustice of early deaths and needless illness and disability. Let us hope that this debate shows us in our best light: as champions of diversity and warriors against unfairness.

8.28 pm

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Having represented Moray as a councillor and Member of the Scottish Parliament, and now as an MP, I have dealt with Gypsy Travellers and their integration with the settled community on many occasions. That is why, during the quick-fire interview with Core Politics TV mentioned by the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), in between questions about my favourite karaoke song and what I would discuss with the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) were we stuck in a lift together, I mentioned that, if I was Prime Minister for the day, there should be tougher enforcement against Gypsy Travellers. I shall explain my choice of words

[Douglas Ross]

later in my speech, but illegal and unauthorised Gypsy Traveller encampments in Moray were a problem when I made that comment in June, they were a problem when the interview was aired in August, and they remain a problem as we debate this issue tonight.

There are, of course, many other issues that would be priorities for any Prime Minister, and I have apologised for saying that enforcement against Gypsy Travellers would be my No. 1 priority, but I do not apologise for speaking up on behalf of the communities throughout Moray that have been affected by illegal and unauthorised encampments. I look forward to contributing to the Westminster Hall debate—secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton)—later this week to expand further on this discussion. It is clear to me that the formation of illegal and unauthorised encampments, and particularly how they are left by the travelling community, leads to much of the friction between the travelling community and the settled community.

Of course, the vast majority of Travellers go about their life in a respectful and friendly way. Sadly, as is the case with much of society, the actions of a minority create a bad impression of the entire community. That brings me back to the remarks I made in June. I called for tougher enforcement. The definition of enforcement is “the process of making sure that people obey something such as a law or rule”.

I may not have been successful in getting my point across, but I was calling for action to be taken when illegal behaviour occurs or local rules are ignored—for exactly the same treatment as we would expect for people who are not Gypsy Travellers.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman mentions enforcement; he will be aware of the TV programme “Can’t Pay? We’ll Take It Away!”, which shows that it is not just a matter of moving people off from wherever they are, because there are also court costs. Does he feel that those costs should not fall on the people? There should be a more urgent process to try to get the people off before all that happens.

Douglas Ross: Absolutely. I agree with the hon. Gentleman and will address that issue later in my speech.

Historically, Moray has had an unusually high number of unauthorised encampments. Some suggest that that is because we have no official Travellers site, yet in 2006, when there was a dedicated site, there were 132 unauthorised sites—one of the highest numbers recorded in the area. It is also important to consider why we no longer have an official halting site. The Chanonry site near Elgin was purpose-built for the travelling community, but ended up as a fortress of illegal activity. It was eventually raided by more than 100 officers from Grampian police in the biggest operation of its kind in Moray. Those arrested were sentenced to a combined 24 years’ imprisonment. I listened to what the Minister said about local authorities establishing sites, but it is not a simple task. Sites are clearly a problem for the local area: given the experiences at Chanonry in Elgin, the communities at Kingsmeadow near Forres and at Arradoul near Buckie, they were reluctant to have an official halting site in their area.

In response to the intervention by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) I would say that actions have consequences. As a result of the actions of Travellers on the Highlands and Islands Enterprise land near Forres, that public body was forced to pay £10,000 to clear up the mess. A site near the old airfield at Dallachy was littered with human waste and needles when the Travellers moved on. In many other parts of Moray, local people and businesses have been intimidated and threatened by the occupants of these sites.

We have heard a lot about fairness; I wish to comment on fairness for the settled community, who often feel not only that there is one rule for the travelling community and another for them, but that their view is ignored. I am a new Member, and I know how highly regarded the House of Commons Library is, but I was disappointed that its briefing for this debate on Gypsies and Travellers and local communities did not mention local communities once. It mentioned settled communities four times: there were three references to tension between the settled and travelling communities, and only one line that mentioned the impact of Traveller sites on the settled community. The fact that there was just one line in a 53-page briefing document will reinforce the feeling of many people in the settled community that their views are ignored.

I have been labelled a bigot and a racist for expressing the concerns of many of my constituents about this issue. Among all the criticism, though, I have also received a huge number of emails and letters from people from across Moray and, indeed, throughout the United Kingdom—people who wanted their concerns to be expressed and the issue to be debated. After all that, I hope that people will take some comfort from the strength of feeling shown by Members from all parties in this debate, and will no longer feel that their voice is ignored.

8.34 pm

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): As co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Gypsies, Travellers and Roma, I am particularly pleased to contribute to this debate and to endorse the comments of colleagues who have pointed to the fact that Gypsies and Travellers are members of our local communities whether they travel, live in houses, or live in settled sites in caravans. The communities have a long history of a rich contribution to our cultural traditions, and an equally long history of suffering intolerance and abuse.

I wish to start by remembering Rodney Bickerstaffe, lost to us last week, who was known to many of my colleagues as a leading union figure and a champion of pensioner rights. He was also president of the Labour Party Campaign for Travellers’ Rights. In 2004, he wrote:

“A litmus test of society’s commitment to fairness and equality is how it treats the most excluded. Current evidence suggests we are failing with regards to the Gypsy and Traveller community.”

It is extremely distressing that, today, we still know that Gypsies and Travellers continue to suffer what has been rightly described as the last respectable form of racism. I call that out when it is seen as coming from opinion leaders. Last year, in Amazon Prime’s “The Grand Tour” Jeremy Clarkson was found by Ofcom to have made comments that had the potential to be “insulting and offensive”, relying heavily on “offensive and stereotyped comparisons”, but the programme was broadcast none the less.

Recently, the Rooney family went on trial on charges relating to modern slavery. In response to defence claims that all Travellers had workers operating under similar conditions, the judge commented:

“Sadly, I very much fear that you may be correct about that.”

I do not believe that the judge had any evidence for making such assertions. It is really important that people in public office do not make those kinds of claims in an unsupported way.

I wish to follow the example of my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams) who talked about disadvantage and inequalities in health outcomes by making some comments about educational outcomes. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) about the very poor educational outcomes suffered by young Gypsies and Travellers in the education system. We know, as he said, that they are much less likely to meet the GCSE threshold. Indeed, their performance is understated further by the fact that many do not even complete schooling beyond the age of 14. We know that they are more likely to be in special schools, more likely to be excluded, more likely to drop out of secondary education and 10 times less likely to go to university. The reasons for that include racist bullying in schools. Today, the *Daily Mail* reports the case of Ben Bennett, who was forced to change schools 11 times as a result of bullying and abuse.

There is a low level of aspiration for the community among teachers and the teaching professions—my hon. Friend rightly drew attention to that—and a lack of funding for Traveller education services, which helps schools to introduce policies to support the education of Gypsy and Traveller children. That scheme has now gone, and, as a result, schools feel unwelcoming to Gypsies and Travellers who are now more likely to be educated at home. There are problems with that as Ofsted is not required to check whether education is actually happening in the home setting, and will only visit if the parents request it.

I am not saying that we should remove that access to home education, because if we do that and do not address the structural discrimination in education it is more likely that these children will drop out of education altogether. What we need are positive policies to ensure that Gypsy and Traveller children thrive and do well in schools. There are very good examples of how that can be done effectively. For example, zero-tolerance bullying policies can be implemented. I urge the Government to work with the children’s commissioner and non-governmental organisations in looking at how such policies might be developed and introduced. The employment of members of staff from the community has been found to be very effective in schools that have a high concentration of Gypsy and Traveller children. It is important that the Government get their promised education advisory group up and running and that it includes members of the Gypsy and Traveller community.

Finally, it is also important to remove and reduce discrimination and discriminatory perceptions in wider society. We must do more to embed Gypsy and Traveller culture across all education settings. I endorse the calls this evening for the introduction into the curriculum of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller history month. If we can get things right in early settings in our schools, I am confident that Gypsy and Traveller children will do better and that our society will enjoy a greater sense of community cohesion with this long-standing part of our local community.

8.39 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green). I recognise her genuine aspirations and intentions, but this is a very serious matter in Essex. That is why our newly-elected colleagues, my hon. Friends the Members for Clacton (Giles Watling), for Saffron Walden (Mrs Badenoch), for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) and for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart), have all been present in this debate.

It should not surprise the House to know that people flood to Essex; it is God’s country. It should surprise them even less that people flood to Southend-on-Sea, which is the finest seaside resort in the country and this year’s alternative city of culture. Our town welcomes people from throughout the United Kingdom and all over the world, but we do not welcome people who are aggressive and violent, and who have no regard for other people and how they live their lives. Now, I am not going to get involved in an argument about the definitions of what a Traveller is or what a Gypsy is. I am talking about people arriving out of the blue in the small urban area I represent and occupying a park or a playing field—there are no farms. It is a difficult situation. The general public are very angry about this issue and we—the politicians—are being blamed for our lack of action. My right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) gave us a solution.

I have consulted with our council’s chief executive, who tells me that evidence packs for court applications are required each and every time there is an encampment. Officers spend significant amounts of time gathering and compiling evidence, making court applications, and serving and following up possession orders. This time results in lost productivity and inability to deliver normal services to residents. Calculating the exact cost is difficult. A typical incursion, however, involves departmental officers, legal teams, enforcement agents, the council and the police. My goodness, Southend-on-Sea Borough Council has been magnificent and our local police have been wonderful in dealing with the situation. Incursions also involve court administrative and hearing time, waste management officers and contractors, locksmiths and general contractors, and the media.

The worst example in my constituency happened between 7 July and 11 July. My hon. Friend the Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe) was here earlier. Now, when I used to represent Basildon, these people were frightened of me and they soon disappeared. I do not seem to have the same effect in Southend, where I turned up at Oakwood Park and, within a few minutes, swiftly did an about-turn. There were small children being absolutely abusive and I saw violence being used. The costs associated with that situation were £13,000 and the cleansing contractor alone cost £2,500—that was for 14 caravans. It was disgraceful destruction that spoils the pleasure of the local residents who use the park. The encampments often damage land and generate a significant amount of rubbish. Portable toilets are often emptied into the bushes, creating a public health risk. There were six events in Southend this year. There I was in Priory Park—an iconic park—when suddenly we realised that eight caravans had turned up.

The amenity value of parks and open spaces for residents and visitors is removed when an incursion is in place and often until the remediation has been completed.

[*Sir David Amess*]

I am told that the cost of parks officers' time to deal with Traveller issues this summer alone was in excess of £4,500. Many Traveller groups have a high understanding of the current legal processes and are able to use that knowledge to ensure that they can stay for as long as possible before moving on to another area. The council invests in preventive measures, blocking off car parks to high-sided vehicles with height barriers, having concrete road blocks and additional security personnel at car parks. That can be effective but it can also prevent legitimate users of the area.

I say to the Minister that there is no point in having a debate unless there is action. Obviously, colleagues and I welcome the fact that we are being invited to have input in the process, but my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford has the answer and I hope the Government will adopt his solution.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. We still have a great number of speakers, as Members will see, so after the next speaker the time limit will be reduced to four minutes.

8.44 pm

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): My hon. Friends the Members for Stockton South (Dr Williams) and for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) were right to remind us—as indeed did my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) from the Front Bench and others—about the importance of people's right to live in the way they choose and about the alternative lifestyles that people have. That is a source of strength for our democracy, and those people are members of our local community, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South pointed out. My hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston was also right to point out the inequality that exists in educational achievement, health and many other factors. I have reiterated those points in my own community, as I am sure other hon. Members have in theirs, in the face of comments on Facebook and elsewhere as a result of some of the illegal sites we have had. That is really important because, if it becomes a choice between supporting the right of people to live in the way they choose and, by objecting to criminal behaviour, not supporting that right, we will not get very far.

So let me start by saying that I support the right of people to live in the way they choose, and that is a source of strength for our democracy. But it cannot be right, in defending that right, for constituents, as other Members have pointed out, to have to put up with a small number of people in a community creating real and difficult problems. It makes it more difficult to defend an alternative lifestyle, which I would wish to defend, if we do not speak up and speak out against some of those who are conducting criminal activity. Indeed, many in the Traveller community wish for those others not to cause them problems.

For example, it cannot be right that I defend an alternative lifestyle that rips up playing fields without any thought for the children who play on them. It cannot be right that I defend an alternative lifestyle in the face of a leisure centre having to be closed to people

using it because some will not conform to the rules that everybody else conforms to. So I will defend the right of people to live in the way they choose, but I will not do that—whoever they are and whatever their alternative lifestyle is—if they do not conform to the rules, regulations and laws of the country, as everybody else has to.

I have said time and again that the frustration comes when people in my community and, I am sure, in communities up and down the country see law breaking and see people doing things for which they themselves would be punished, arrested or dealt with by the authorities. In summing up, the Minister must be really clear in defending the right of people to live their lives as they choose, but he must also be clear, as we have all said, about the importance of respecting the rule of law.

Earlier, the Minister of State said he was going to consult on existing laws, and there is clearly a problem with them—if there were not, everybody would not be complaining about them. However, the police are complaining, local people are complaining and local authorities are complaining, so are we talking about new powers as well? That is my simple question for the Minister.

I conclude with this: it is a source of great strength for our country that we have different people living according to different lifestyles, which I would not personally choose, and I hope they can carry on living in that way for many years to come, but they also need to obey the law.

8.49 pm

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Much of the debate has understandably focused on illegal encampments, and I certainly have those in my area, too, despite Bradford Council having not too long ago spent £820,000 refurbishing Gypsy encampments, including in my constituency. Even though only eight pitches are being used at Esholt, also in my constituency, that does not stop illegal encampments in other parts of the constituency, when there are perfectly good pitches to be used on such sites. It is not surprising that local people are fed up about it.

There are examples after examples. In March, it was reported that one caravan invaded an 84-year-old lady's land. She was told that it and the other caravans trying to gain entry would leave if she paid £1,200. More recently, in August, there were reports of a man in Slough who ended up having to pay £5,000 to some Travellers after he tried to go through the legal channels and was left with so much waste at the end that the estimated clear-up was going to cost £20,000. The Government have to get a grip of this issue and I hope that the debate will spur them to do so.

In the brief time available, I want to touch on a couple of issues that have not been mentioned to do with other areas where Gypsies and Travellers cause a huge number of problems. One is the treatment of animals. The mistreatment of animals at the Gypsy site in Esholt is absolutely disgusting. In March last year I called for a debate on the subject of Travellers and animal welfare. Despite numerous complaints from me, local residents and other campaigners about the appalling treatment of animals, particularly horses, at Esholt Gypsy encampment in my constituency, for many months Bradford Council and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals did absolutely nothing.

That comes back to the same point: people feel that different rules apply to different people. If anybody else were treating animals in that way, they would be prosecuted, but because they were Gypsies and Travellers, people were pussyfooting around them and people, understandably, get fed up. I am delighted that the RSPCA eventually took some action and people were convicted—rightly so and not before time, but also not before those animals suffered far more than they should have done.

The other thing I want to point out is the very high level of criminal activity among Gypsies and Travellers. The hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) alluded to this when he pointed out that Her Majesty's inspectorate of prisons suggested that some 5% of prisoners identified themselves as Gypsy, Romany or Traveller. It does not take a mathematical genius to work out that, if something like 0.1% of the population in England or Wales is Traveller or Gypsy, and if 5% of the prison population identify themselves as Gypsies or Travellers, we have a massive problem in terms of crime.

Some people—no doubt the sort of politically correct people who have taken over the Labour party—might well suggest that that is all down to the fact that all judges and magistrates are racist against Gypsies and unfairly punish them in the courts, but the fact of the matter is, as we all know in our heart of hearts, whether it is politically correct or not to say so, that there is a much higher level of criminal activity among Gypsies and Travellers than among the rest of the community, and that is reflected in the fact that so many more of them are in prison than is the case among the population at large. Given that we know how hard it is to be sent to prison in the first place, I begin to wonder what crimes they must be committing. This does not apply just to adults who are Gypsies and Travellers; it also applies to juveniles and young offenders. We must not pussyfoot around these issues—we must address them head on. The public expect nothing less.

8.53 pm

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): I know that I am new to this place, but I found the tone of the debate quite odd. When I saw that we were having a general debate on Gypsies and Travellers, I thought I must be missing some substantive motion that would be more specific and would narrow it down somewhat. That would have allowed us to debate a specific point, rather than having a general debate about entire communities—and I say communities on purpose because Gypsy and Traveller people are not a unified group. There is no one community that we can talk about.

The Minister's speech positioned Gypsies, Travellers and local communities, but they are one and the same. Gypsies and Travellers are part of local communities and are our constituents if they reside in our constituencies. There should not be an othering of those communities. I know that this may be a controversial point, but imagine if there were a general debate on black people and local communities. We can hear how nonsensical that would sound to an outside observer.

Having worked alongside Gypsy and Traveller communities for many years, I know that tired and powerful stereotypes about them still exist, such as that they will put a curse on us, that they do not pay their taxes—a slur that I am very disappointed to say I heard shouted from the Government Benches during the debate—

that they are more violent or that they are dirty, unruly or strange for wanting to be nomadic. We need to challenge the persistent argument that there are legitimate and non-legitimate Travellers, and I will come back to that point in a second.

Philip Davies: On the question of paying taxes, I refer the hon. Lady to what John Grant, the chief inspector at the RSPCA and a Gypsy himself, said about Gypsies and Travellers in a speech—she can watch the video of it on the RSPCA blog—to the world horse welfare conference in 2012:

“I would say 95% don't pay any taxes. A lot of their money is held in new motors, new caravans and good quality horses.”

That is what a Gypsy and Traveller himself said. Does the hon. Lady know better than he does?

Laura Pidcock: There are many types of taxes that communities may pay. We know of very many rich people who avoid paying their taxes, but that has not been made the subject of a long debate.

There is little understanding among policy makers and legislators about nomadism historically or in contemporary life. There is often a judgmental snobbery about Gypsy and Traveller communities and traditions, which means that legislation starts from the presumption that a settled life in bricks and mortar is culturally superior. Very little attempt is made to distinguish between travelling communities, and that normalises the homogenisation and, I suppose, exoticisation of those communities.

Because of the inadequate number of sites in the UK, Gypsy and Traveller families are forced on to the road. They face journeys of hostility, with constant evictions, boulders on many green spaces and trenches dug by communities to keep trailers off. Provision is inadequate, but I have heard from very few Members any critical analysis of the consequences. Inadequate provision on the road means that Gypsy and Traveller families have little access to water and no bin provision, and they often face annoyed and angry communities. I can understand why communities are angry and annoyed if a horrendous mess is left behind, but it is not possible for those families to travel constantly. At some point, they have to stop. There must be much more provision for Travellers and Gypsies to reduce tension and secure their human rights.

My substantive point is that the planning policy for Traveller sites, which was released in 2015, is very much part of the problem. The guidance redefines who Gypsies and Travellers are for the purpose of planning. In essence, if a Gypsy or Traveller stops travelling permanently, even because of education or ill health, they cease to be a Gypsy or Traveller. In my eyes, that is cultural sanitation and real arrogance on the part of the Government.

As I have mentioned, being a Gypsy or Traveller is much more than moving from one place to another. It is part of a person's history and ancestry—part of the fabric of their existence—and the Government's belief that they can supersede the community's self-definition with their own definition is absurd. If a Scottish person no longer lived in Scotland, would that mean that they were no longer Scottish? No, because nationality and cultural identity are about much more than where somebody resides. A member of the travelling community, Phien O'Reachtigan, who is part of the National Gypsy and

[*Laura Pidcock*]

Traveller Council, has said that the definition has forced the community on to the road, and as a result there is more conflict between Travellers and local communities.

I finish by saying that we are all very mindful of the horrendous discrimination and racism that Gypsy and Traveller communities have experienced, and we need to create a system that helps us to eradicate such racism rather than exacerbating it. I do not have hope, listening to this debate tonight. We need to make sure that we are not part of the eradication of Gypsy and Traveller culture. This place needs to take quick action to reduce conflict. If we do not, I can only imagine that conflict in communities will increase.

8.59 pm

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): All of us could sign up to four outcomes that relate to tonight's debate. First, we should all believe in freedom and equality under the law. Secondly, we want the best possible community relations, but good community relations are undermined because we sadly do not always have equality under the law. Thirdly, we want good outcomes for all disadvantaged groups, but education and health outcomes for Travellers are shockingly bad, as we have heard tonight. Fourthly, we want fairness for those in the settled community who are persistently affected by adverse Traveller behaviour. We should all be able to sign up to those four principles, so I hope that we can coalesce, take some of the heat out of the debate and get some positive solutions.

I commend the intervention from my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman), who made the key point that local authority Gypsy and Traveller accommodation assessments are impossibly unfair on some areas that already have large numbers of people and over-occupied sites, because such areas will never be able to fulfil the requirements currently placed on them by the Planning Inspectorate. I was disappointed that the Minister who opened the debate, my hon. Friend the Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma), did not mention the concerns about some privately run Traveller sites where, frankly, the rule of law does not currently apply and where horrendous things are happening. I am aware of sites where we have seen modern slavery, the abuse of tenants who are sub-letting and all types of criminality. I ask the Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), to pick up on that point about privately run sites when he responds. Local authorities cannot enforce the law on such sites, requiring a warrant to enter some of them. Planning legislation is utterly unfit for the task.

We know that rubbish has been left all over the Olympic park, and my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) mentioned the incident at Langley near Slough. We also know what happened in Cromer recently, where the chief constable of Norfolk admitted that real anger and alarm had been experienced by many in that community following a rampage of Travellers that should not have been allowed.

As for action, I have several suggestions. We need an up-to-date Land Registry. We need the Gypsy and Traveller accommodation assessment to require people to answer questions in interviews. If they can avoid answering the council officer's questions about whether they are Travellers, the system simply does not work.

We need immediate court access for local authorities. The planning policy guidance on Traveller sites from the Department should include a requirement for licensing, which would give local authorities proper power. I want the ability to impound vehicles involved in fly-tipping or other criminal activity, regardless of ownership. I also want checks on the wealth of Travellers, some of whom are enormously wealthy. Why should the taxpayer have to provide pitches for them?

A constituent—a member of the settled community—came to speak to me after a dinner last week and said that he has experienced endless break-ins and arson attacks and that sewage and rubbish have been dumped all over his land. He looked at me and said, "Does anyone in the Government care about this issue?" I want to be able to go back to him and say, "The Government get it. The Government do care. We are here for everyone to be treated equally."

9.3 pm

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Like so many others, my constituency has been plagued by the problem of illegal encampments for the past two years. It is the same in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden), who cannot be here tonight because he has suffered a bereavement. I want to make it clear that I am referring to the behaviour of a problematic minority; I have no wish for my remarks to be construed as a general criticism of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people.

Enforcement and clean-ups have cost Birmingham City Council an estimated £700,000 in the past year, and there are some 395 unauthorised encampments across the seven west midlands authorities, which provides some idea of the scale of things in the area. I thank the police and crime commissioner, David Jamieson, the officers and councillors of Birmingham City Council, Adrian Jones of the National Federation of Gypsy Liaison Groups, and Abiline McShane, who is a constituent of mine. All of them have helped my understanding of the issue.

I concur with other Members' comments about the problems that illegal encampments cause so many of our constituents. There is no single solution, but there are some things that would help. More transit sites would give people more places to go to and make it easier for the police to use powers to move people from unauthorised sites.

Police powers would be strengthened if they could direct groups across combined authorities. I urge the Government to consider a change to section 62A of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 to allow police officers to direct unauthorised encampments to a site in a neighbouring authority where the authorities are working together as a combined authority or under some other sharing arrangement. That would make a significant difference to some of the problems we have at the moment.

We could do with a further change to protect private property so that, if a landowner recovers a site from unauthorised occupation, there is some sanction to prevent repeat returns, which is what happens at the moment. I know it is not popular to ask for money, but I think the Government should consider a fund from which local authorities might draw or borrow money to help with setting up transit sites, because they are key to a long-term solution.

There are obvious problems, but I want to praise West Midlands police, Birmingham City Council and particularly Councillor Karen McCarthy for pioneering the use of injunctions against persons unknown. That marks a substantial change in the law, and will make it easier to get injunctions in the future.

I want to conclude by saying that injunctions are not the answer—we simply end up with a displacement problem—but rather a short-term solution or sticking plaster. We need to find longer-term measures, some of which, to be fair, the Minister hinted at today. It seems to me that quite a lot of effort is being made by Members on both sides of the House for people to be reasonable. We have to find solutions that are practical and address the problems our constituents are experiencing, but that do not seek to scapegoat people unnecessarily. That will not solve our problems but create a different set of problems, and leave us with the same issues time and again.

9.7 pm

Mr Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): My constituents in Poole are reasonable and tolerant people—they believe in live and let live—but every summer, about the time of the Dorset steam fair, several groups descend on the town. We are not blessed with fields and farms, but we have parks and public open spaces, and quite often these groups illegally occupy them by causing criminal damage. The police do not take action because they do not have confidence in the law at the moment and tend to avoid getting embroiled in such situations. It then falls to the local authority, Poole Borough Council, which has a choice: either it takes legal action, which is long and imprecise and, if the group it is taking action against moves a few hundred yards or to another site, a total waste of time and money; or it negotiates with the groups, providing toilets, bags, some help and support, and sometimes water, in the hope that they will leave after 10 days or two weeks.

Whatever the council does, my constituents get upset, because they have to pay the bill for the clean-up at the end of the occupation. In the meantime, they are quite often denied the use of a park, play area, facility or playground for their children and grandchildren. They get very angry about that, and they get even more angry when they phone the police and get excuses. They phone the local council, which spends most of its time explaining what it cannot do, rather than what it can do, and they then phone all the local councillors, who helpfully tell them to contact the Member of Parliament.

Eventually, my constituents get around to me, and I say that when I have had meetings with Ministers, I have made the point that sections 61 and 62 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 do not actually work. We need to do something about that. In the past, Ministers have announced that they would have a consultation. The last time I talked to a Minister—my right hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis)—was six or seven years ago, and there was a consultation at that point. Although I welcome such a consultation, what is necessary for public confidence is action.

Relations between Travellers and the public would be much better if there was a precise way of dealing with the problem. Then we could get to the root of the problem which, as many hon. Members have said, is about education and health in the Traveller community. What we need is to give confidence to the police and the local authority so that they can take action efficiently

and effectively, without too much cost, so that they are happy, my constituents are happy and we can start to deal with the nub of the problem, which is the underachievement and so on in the Traveller community.

What we have at the moment is a total and utter mess. Confidence in law and order drops, confidence in the council drops, confidence in councillors drops and confidence in the Member of Parliament drops. The reality is that people feel very dissatisfied. In a world where it is sometimes difficult to persuade people to turn out to vote, if someone is behaving antisocially at the bottom of their garden and we cannot do anything about it, they ask, “What’s the point?”

I hope that the Minister hears the message from today. First, we need a consultation which will receive plenty of advice—we have heard some good advice from colleagues today. Secondly, we need a timescale, because we do not want the issue to disappear into the Department for Communities and Local Government and never come out. Thirdly, as we have the joys of a two-year Session—we will not have a Queen’s Speech because of Brexit—we will have time to get legislation through. There is bound to be a criminal justice Bill, so let us use the opportunity and legislate.

9.11 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I start by saying how much I appreciated the speeches by my hon. Friends the Members for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd), for Stockton South (Dr Williams), for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) and for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), the last of whom so ably chairs the all-party parliamentary group for Gypsies, Travellers and Roma. They have given at least some balance to the debate.

I was dismayed, as I am sure other colleagues were, by the title of the debate. “Gypsies and Travellers and local communities” immediately suggests division. Gypsies and Travellers are part of local communities, and there is an inherent contradiction in the title of the debate. I am sorry that some of the comments we have heard today have echoed the calumnies and untruths that appear in the media, especially papers such as the *Daily Mail*, *The Sun* and the Channel 4 Gypsy wedding series. I have heard it repeated that Gypsies are rich, and that there is one law for Gypsies and Travellers and another for the settled community.

Last month, the Traveller Movement published its excellent report, “The last acceptable form of racism?”, which my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale quoted. I fear that that is what it is. Let us recall the statistics, rather than unfounded rumours. Three quarters of Gypsies and Travellers live in bricks and mortar, so only a quarter are in caravans, let alone travelling at any one time. When one breaks that down into how many are in unauthorised encampments, it comes to 4% of that 25%. So we are talking about 1% of the total at most. Just as the vast majority of Gypsies and Travellers are not causing any nuisance or problems for their neighbours, so those people who do cause such nuisance are not necessarily Gypsies or Travellers. I regret the elision of ethnic groups with antisocial behaviour, the flouting of planning laws and so on.

I saw a survey today that said that “37% of parents would be unhappy (just four out of ten would be happy) with their child going to the home of a Gypsy/Traveller for a play date. Again, this compares with just 5% for Black Caribbean and 2% for White British.”

[*Andy Slaughter*]

In one way we should celebrate that no division was found—as would probably have been the case 30 years ago—between how the black community is regarded compared to the white community, but what an indictment it is that people can show that degree of prejudice. The people answering that survey are not inherently racist, but they have picked up so much from the media. It is not from their own experience, because most people do not know Gypsies and Travellers in their own communities. I hope that the House gives no succour to such views.

There is a history to this, which includes the Caravan Sites Act 1968 and what the last Labour Government did in requiring local authorities—and giving them the funds—to provide legitimate sites. I am afraid that the Conservatives in office have taken that money away and removed the requirements on local authorities. Conservative Members then throw up their hands and say, “Look at this increase in unauthorised sites.” If there are transit sites with facilities and if there is negotiated stopping, we do not get conflict. We do end up with local authorities saving money, and Gypsies and Travellers living in harmony with the settled community.

Mr Francois: If I may contradict the hon. Gentleman, Basildon Borough Council has a considerable number of sites for Travellers, yet it still suffers from the sorts of problems I outlined in my speech. He is incorrect to say that if there are sites, we do not get problems.

Andy Slaughter: I thought the right hon. Gentleman’s speech, with all due respect, was one of the worst I heard today. I am afraid his intervention just confirms my view. He should remove the blinkers and prejudice from his own eyes before making contributions of that kind.

Let me end by speaking to those in the Gypsy and Traveller community, because they do watch these debates. I praise organisations such as Traveller Law Reform Project, The Traveller Movement, Friends, Families and Travellers, and the London Gypsy and Traveller Unit, who admirably represent those communities. There are, notwithstanding some of the speeches they will have heard today, many parliamentarians, past and present, who have done their best to represent Gypsy and Traveller communities. I particularly pay tribute to the late Lord Avebury, who introduced the Caravan Sites Act 1968 and was an advocate throughout his parliamentary lifetime; Tim Boswell, who is now in the other place; Richard Bennett from the Local Government Association; Julie Morgan, who used to run the all-party group; and Rodney Bickerstaffe. I will end by quoting from his obituary in *The Guardian* this week, which said:

“At one time his mother’s family were so poor they lived in a Gypsy caravan in a field. Unsurprisingly, given his unstinting championing of the underdog, Bickerstaffe was one of the few public figures to loudly champion the cause of Travellers over the years.”

I wish that more Members of this House would emulate Rodney’s example.

9.16 pm

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for bringing the debate gently back to Essex once more.

I rise to stand up for my community in Tendring and Clacton, which has the beautiful aesthetics of a rural district. However, so much open space makes it vulnerable

to illegal encampments. We are a coastal resort and, like many others around the country, we have regular incursions, especially during the summer and over bank holiday weekends. In short, we pretty much know when and where to expect incursions, and we should be able to react swiftly and positively. It needs to be stated that we have a moral obligation to all our citizens to make sure local policy works for everyone. That, quite rightly, includes the provision of good quality legal Traveller sites. However, that cannot overshadow the damage inflicted on land, policing and local authority budgets, and on community relations, from excessive and illegal encampments. We have legal Traveller sites, but that is not where Travellers necessarily want to go.

In May this year, three caravans and a van arrived at Vista Road recreation ground in Clacton, in the corner of the field next to the boundary with Clacton County High School. At Easter, 16 caravans stayed on land at the front of the Columbine Centre, next to Walton-on-the-Naze Lifestyles, making it their home for almost a week. We had to clean up for both and it was very expensive. Travellers also pitched up on a school playing field, just as children left to begin their summer holidays, with seven caravans and vehicles arriving on land that backs on to Whitehall Academy and Clacton Coastal Academy.

This causes great disruption to the community and it must be managed in the right way. For my Clacton constituency in Essex, there are broadly two routes for redress against illegal encampments. First, the Essex countywide Traveller unit—ECTU—is informed. Its team makes a visit and then serves a direction to leave. That gives the group 24 hours to move off. If they do not do so, the whole process of court action begins. Alternatively, the police have the section 61 powers, which can be used straight away if criminal damage or public safety is an issue, or if more than six vehicles form the encampment. I commend the Home Office for working closely with the police to ensure the powers they have are fit for purpose. However, the decision on when and whether to use police powers is an independent operational decision for the police. Put simply, it is a judgment call for the police.

In our community, police action is preferred as it is swift and shows the full force of the law to those who seek to break it. I am mindful, however, of the issue of police capacity in enforcing such laws. I personally would be relaxed about paying a few more pounds a year on my precept if the 2% cap were removed, as it would allow us to increase police funding and give us greater capacity to use the current laws. While the police precept cap seems to be a separate issue, I must say that my constituents wish to see the law robustly enforced.

Julian Knight: The problem is, though, that there is no guarantee that the money would be spent on that. It could just fall into the general police budget.

Giles Watling: It could indeed, but we have to find the money from somewhere, and it is lacking in Tendring district. I had a long talk with my local commander just two weeks ago and I know roughly where we are going.

My local residents would not get away with illegal developments, and neither must anyone else—it is one law, and we must all be equal under it. Section 61 powers should be used wherever necessary, and the appropriate resources must be part of that—not a popular thing to

say, I know. Essex has a very low precept, and thus a 2% increase would raise far less per head than a 2% increase for a force with a higher precept. I do not think my constituents would begrudge an extra £10 a year or so if it meant an increased policing capacity to act swiftly and decisively on issues such as these illegal sites, and of course on many other criminal activities.

We need a two-pronged conversation about the fitness of the law and the ability to deliver it. All people in Clacton want is fairness under the law. Seeing an illegal encampment tackled is a hallmark of this concept. While I am open to conversations about changing or tightening the law, as mentioned earlier, the starting point must be giving the current law the opportunity to function at its peak potential and thus scrapping the precept cap and increasing policing capacity to tackle the illegal encampment. Then we can perhaps move on to the Irish option.

9.21 pm

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): I am pleased to contribute to this debate because, since my election, my constituents have called upon me to raise this matter in the House.

I want to focus on the fairness of the illegal incursions. We expect everybody to abide by the law and accept that there are rules we have to abide by. Over the last couple of years, Medway has seen a large increase in the number of illegal incursions. Medway was formerly part of the county of Kent, which has a long history of Travellers, Roma and Gypsies. As a county, we have been extremely tolerant and accepting of their way of life, but over the last couple of years we have seen our town centre car parks used as encampments and criminal damage done.

In one case, Travellers arrived at a green flag park in the centre of Rochester—it has a friends group and is a jewel in the crown of Rochester—on a Friday evening. Sadly, we could not get a representative from the council to turn up that evening, and it took some time to get the police to turn up to try and protect the site. I was actually contacted by constituents. I and my fellow ward councillor, Stuart Tranter, who happened to be mayor at the time, had to go out at 12 o'clock at night to speak to the Travellers because unfortunately we could not get a representative from the council to attend. The excuse given by the duty officer at the council was that he was too fearful to attend on his own. I pointed out that I was the MP and down there on my own and that I would speak to people within my constituency.

Another major issue is the effect on businesses. We have seen incursions not just on council land but on private land and industrial estates. Some businesses in Strood have contacted me and said that it has affected their business and their ability just to get into work and operate.

As I have said, in the past there has been what I regard as a reluctance on the part of the police to use the powers that they have. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) that it comes down very much to the individual judgment call of the police at the time. In the case of one incursion in my constituency, a van was driven across a green park space, pushing against a resident. The police decided to tell the resident that he should behave because he might be arrested, while allowing the Gypsies to stay where they were. That caused discomfort in the community, and many residents were up in arms very late at night.

Luckily, because of my action, there is now an agreement between Medway council and the local police and a procedure, and I hope that that will help next year. However, I welcome the consultation, because it is clear that the present arrangement is not working in built-up areas such as mine. We need to act if we are to retain the confidence of the community.

9.26 pm

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Everyone in the House will agree that members of our communities have a right to choose alternative ways of life, but none of them has the right to opt out of British law. When that breaks down, not only community cohesion but respect for the rule of law and those who represent the people affected break down as well.

Over the past three summers, there have been a number of Traveller camps in Dudley. Some of those camps, although unauthorised, have caused very little damage or disruption. Indeed, at least one group of travellers from Scandinavia tidied up after themselves, mowed the grass, and probably left the pitch in a better condition than they had found it in. Sadly, however, too many others have caused significant criminal damage and disruption to local communities. There have been illegal incursions in areas including Netherton, Woodside, Wordsley and Kingswinford. There has been defecation and urination on playing pitches and children's playing areas. While the impact of that is, of course, felt most keenly by residents in the immediate area, the cost of dealing with it—in terms of enforcement and clearing up—is felt by the whole borough and has amounted to more than £150,000.

The reflex reaction is that the police need more powers, but there is rarely any suggestion of what those powers would look like, how they would be used and, indeed, whether they would be used. I certainly support giving the police new powers to deal with illegal Traveller camps, but I think that many of the reasons that are given for the fact that the police often seem to consider it inappropriate or unlawful to use section 61 powers because of the lack of welfare assessments and the needs of the children are likely to be applied to any such new powers. We need far clearer guidance, because there is enormous variation across the country, and often within police forces, in the way in which the section 61 powers are used. I look to the Minister, working with colleagues in the Home Office, to produce that clearer guidance on which councils and police forces can rely, so that they know when it is appropriate to use the powers that the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 appears to grant to police forces.

We need reform of how section 62A is structured, with regard to the area to which Travellers can be moved for a transit camp, and in how capacity is assessed, so that combined authorities can pool their capacity and the police can move unauthorised camps into transit camps, such as those being developed in Dudley.

9.30 pm

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): I warmly welcome the proposed review of the law in this area because, as the Minister will know, I have asked questions about this before. I want to reference the

[*Mr Ranil Jayawardena*]

Library, which is usually a great source of information, and to thank it for its briefing paper for this debate, which states:

“Unauthorised sites are frequently a source of tension between the travelling and settled communities... a shortage of permanent and transit Gypsy and Traveller sites continues to be a pressing issue, which results in unauthorised encampments”.

However, I must say that this is wrong in principle. All parties here agree that we need to build more homes, but if I was to build a home unlawfully and say that that was the reason, I would be laughed out of court.

We do have discrimination in this country, not against Travellers and Gypsies, given the number of advocates they clearly have on the Opposition Benches, but against the hard-working, honest residents of communities up and down the land, the silent majority and too often the forgotten people. There is not a level playing field and something must be done.

Whether it is section 77 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994, which takes too long to effect—a constituent wrote to me about their frustration at the length of time that these matters seem to take—or section 61 of the same Act, which gives the police powers that they cannot use, perhaps because the disruption is below the threshold of public disorder, which perhaps will be dealt with in the review, or section 62A, which I referenced in an earlier intervention, which gives the police the powers that I think they need to direct trespassers on any land, but which is restricted because there must be a Traveller pitch in the same local authority area, this is unfair. If I build a home without permission because I want to live somewhere, the local authority does not have to give me another plot. It is a totally unlevel playing field and something must be done.

In the short time available, I want to say something about local councillors and councils. I commend County Councillor Rhydian Vaughan, who has been working on a Traveller case in Bramley, where it is alleged that the children of Travellers have been firing ball bearings at windows in the vicinity. I pay tribute to Borough Councillor Venetia Rowland, who has been working on a case involving the illegal felling of 500 trees in Sherfield, bordering the residents of my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) over in Sherfield Park. That is totally wrong. They know how to play the system and they have played it, and it is unacceptable. Some parish councils are also worthy of mention, such as Silchester Parish Council, which has been tackling the retrospective planning application for an unauthorised Traveller encampment.

Even though the principle is wrong, my constituents recognise that, within the law today, it is necessary to provide those other sites. One wrote to me, stating:

“I believe that locally there is already provision for travellers...albeit in Berkshire, so the broad area cannot be characterised as failing to provide facilities for travellers”.

But the legislation does not take that into account, as the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) mentioned earlier.

I share the sentiments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) and my hon. Friend the Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe). I hope that today's debate will be the start of a real shift in Government policy—a policy that has not shifted since 1994—and

that it will lead to the Government reconsidering criminal legislation in this area and recasting existing legislation to make it work. More must be done. Constituents demand it—and, boy, do they deserve it.

9.34 pm

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I do not know whether you have ever visited Solihull, Mr Speaker, but it is blessed with many parks and other green and open spaces. I, like the rest of my town, was really looking forward to spending the summer enjoying those open spaces, but unfortunately we have attracted an unprecedented spate of Traveller incursions, which has tested Solihull Council's defences and my constituents' patience to the limit.

Unauthorised camps deny residents access to shared community spaces, but that is the least of the trouble: they are also very often accompanied by a spate of antisocial and even criminal behaviour. Not only have local businesses reported vandalism, but in the most recent incursions an elderly lady and autistic child were attacked in Shirley Park.

I have even had reports of rubbish being taken from Birmingham, where there has been a prolonged bin strike, and dumped on public land in Solihull by groups of Travellers in exchange for cash payments. The distress caused can be measured by the huge volume of emails I have received over the summer and the almost 4,000 signatures on my petition calling for the council to invest in new, more effective protections for public spaces, as well as the targeted injunctions mentioned earlier by the right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar). The rich irony is that I know for a fact that those injunctions in Sandwell have worked—the groups have moved down to Solihull. That pattern is repeated across the country, judging by what hon. Members have said today.

I have also spent months in close contact with council officers and the police communicating the concerns of residents and local landlords. Too often, I have found that a particular group were simply being chased from park to park, with a council needing to seek a new eviction notice in the courts every time the Travellers pitched up at a new location. Other bands would circumvent court orders by temporarily merging with others and parting again in new combinations to which the order no longer applied. The police potentially have some powers under section 61, but the bar for implementation can be very high indeed. I have argued strongly that that bar needs to be lowered and that the repetitive nature of these incursions should be taken into account.

A lot of money has also been spent on the proofing against Traveller incursions of public spaces and parks. Okay, that can work in some instances, but it can also ruin the aspect of these green spaces. Why should my constituents have to tolerate trenches being dug, trees being uprooted and bollards being put in place? Why should council officers not be at work because they are guarding other green spaces, while Travellers are being moved on from other locations?

Many suggestions have been made today, and I am sure that stories such as mine have been repeated throughout the debate. I appeal to Ministers. They said that the review will consider the law; I presume that that will mean new laws. I hope that they will take soundings from my hon. Friend the Member for South Basildon

and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe) and my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Mr Syms). Enough is enough: we cannot keep playing this game every summer with our constituents—the public land, the cost, the damage. The Government must toughen up the laws. Let us give them the sinews to act.

9.38 pm

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): Odd stuff has been going on in the Chamber this evening, Mr Speaker; I have been keeping an eye on it while you have been gone. Before you left, however, you may have seen the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) congratulating the Housing Minister on how he opened the debate. Since you have been gone, the hon. Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams) has congratulated the Prime Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heapey) has agreed with the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden), and I have agreed with the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker).

The people watching on the TV and seeing this unusual level of agreement will clearly be scratching their heads in the months and years to come if we do not sort out this significant problem as we have discussed this evening. We have heard about hundreds of unauthorised encampments costing millions of pounds. Until 26 September this year, we had 54 unauthorised encampments in Walsall: 40 on public land and 14 on private land, costing a total of £190,000—that is just the cost to the council and does not include the cost of police and other support services. This summer has felt like a bizarre game of cat and mouse, as the council has chased pretty much the same group of Travellers all around the authority.

For me, a huge part of the solution lies in injunctions. We have heard mixed messages this evening about whether they work or not, but in the black country we have got a High Court injunction against car cruising. That injunction has been taken out against unknown people, and since it came into effect, I understand that 17 people have been prosecuted. If it is possible to have an injunction of that nature across the whole black country, why can we not have something similar that will address the issue of unauthorised encampments?

Now that we have got a combined authority in the west midlands, why not move some powers up there to give it greater power to deal with the problem? For example, we have heard Members talk about section 62 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994. I understand that one of the problems is that the police can move people only within a borough. Clearly, we have a level of devolution in the west midlands; we have got the combined authority. Why do we not give those seven authorities the opportunity to try to tackle the problem collectively? I would also like the Government to review the law in relation to private land and businesses. The police and crime commissioner advises that better legal protection for private landowners and business premises would assist with that work.

I do not think it is beyond the wit of the people in this room and the Government to deal with the problem. We have heard from Members in all parts of the Chamber that there is a willingness to collectively address the problem. I hope sincerely that after this debate we see some movement in that direction.

9.41 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): The hour is late and we are all short of time, but I welcome the consultation that the Minister has announced this evening. I hope that it will extend not just to local authorities, but to businesses and private landowners, who are also affected.

The Minister has mentioned that constituents can feed into the process. I will be encouraging mine to do so, because Gypsy and Traveller-related matters, particularly unauthorised encampments, are currently the biggest issue in my postbag and email inbox. It is fair to say that the issue takes up a huge proportion of time in my office in telephone calls from residents who are feeling frustrated, scared, upset, sometimes intimidated and sometimes, understandably, quite angry. For us in Aldridge-Brownhills, these are not just one-off, short-stay visits that leave without a trace; no, they have become regular incursions, like the ones we have heard about this evening, since the start of the summer. However, we are talking not just about this summer; this has been building over a number of years. The encampments often last a week at a time, and it is not uncommon for them to comprise more than 50 caravans.

We have seen encampments in Aldridge, Brownhills, Pelsall and Walsall Wood. It is understandable that my constituents are at breaking point with what has become a merry-go-round of cat and mouse. “When will it end?” they are asking. They are tired and fed up with the antisocial behaviour, the noise, the rubbish and the mess—it can be household, domestic and even human waste—that is so often left in the trail. It is the council that is left to clear up the mess and the council tax payer who picks up the bill. In the borough of Walsall, this runs into hundreds of thousands of pounds. This is money that could be going back into our communities, to those services that we really value and want to see strengthened.

As Members have probably gathered, I feel strongly about this. I feel strongly that local councils need to work much more closely with the police and that the Government need to seek to understand—this is why the consultation is a starting point—whether existing legislation needs to be implemented more effectively, which would be a help, or strengthened. Some suggestions could include looking at sections 61, 62, 77 and 78 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994; the Irish solution, which was touched on earlier; common law; the use of injunctions; the use of transit sites; and criminal justice measures covering littering, fly-tipping and environmental protections. Basically, what more can be done to protect sites? A long-term solution is needed, but my residents need some short-term protections too.

I had wanted to touch on Traveller issues relating to educational attainment and health inequalities, and on modern slavery, which we should address, but sadly I do not have the time to do so. This evening, I wish to keep the focus on the areas I have outlined, as they have been very much raised by my constituents. It is not good enough for public bodies to gold plate human rights and equalities legislation. The issues faced by the settled community when an unauthorised encampment arrives on their doorstep are huge, as I have seen all too often. The cost to the council and the police, and the pressure and strain on resources, can be immense. I am fortunate

[Wendy Morton]

in that I have a Westminster Hall debate on Thursday; I plug it now to anyone who wants to contribute. Let me close with a reminder of a salient point: with rights must surely come responsibilities, and with responsibilities will come respect.

9.45 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Disappointingly, but perhaps not surprisingly, tonight's debate has focused on the challenges experienced by communities as a result of unauthorised encampments. Although we should not dismiss or minimise the impact of those sites, we should not lose sight of the genuine, law-abiding Gypsy Traveller experiences. I have been looking through "The last acceptable form of racism?", the report produced by the Traveller Movement, and some of the examples it contains are distressing:

"Schools are the worst. Gypsy children are constantly bullied";

"Even the teachers would call our family the 'Gypsy family'. Like we were a disease";

"Because me mam couldn't read or write, they belittled her";

"Many kids used to verbally abuse me over being a Gypsy";

"Schools don't take bullying of Traveller children seriously";

and

"If I put Romany in the equality monitoring section, never got interviews".

This goes on and on in different areas, be it healthcare, policing or access to services. These things are all part and parcel of our communities and we have a responsibility to deal with them.

The repeated demonising and marginalisation of a whole community risks further isolating them and growing the sense of adversarial aggression. This House has a responsibility to set the right tone in a debate such as this and not allow a genuine desire to raise issues from constituencies around the country—I believe that is what it is—to spill over into discriminatory language. Thankfully, this evening's debate has mainly been undertaken with great care, and I wish to thank colleagues from across the House for their considered contributions.

One in eight, or 13%, of Traveller caravans are on unauthorised sites, and many more authorised sites are needed. The number of caravans has grown in the past decade, but changes to councils' duties since 2010 mean that Ministers cannot accurately establish the need for sites and homes, and cannot plan or secure any new supply needed to meet demand. The west midlands has been very well represented here this evening, and clearly a significant level of disruption has been experienced in that community, but it is important that we look at the fact that across the eastern and west midlands regions combined, just 15 out of 70 local authorities have identified full five-year plans for deliverable sites. Clearly, there is great scope for improvement on that, in order to try to ease those tensions and tackle any unsuitable sites that are being used.

Let me deal with some of the comments made by some of my colleagues. First, we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), who was addressing the point about people living outside the rules of communities and highlighting the specific challenges posed by city unauthorised encampments. He indicated that his local authority has tried to work with

those encampments but has experienced 140 unauthorised sites, which have caused difficulties, including hazardous fly-tipping. He says that these are not encampments but unlawful businesses, and perhaps a change of view as to how people are operating would assist in dealing with some of those issues. He recommended getting magistrates to give orders over the weekend and utilising the DVLA to search vehicle registrations.

My hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Mr Robinson) mentioned that there is a potential for bias and racial discrimination to be bred if we allow the current tone of debate to grow in the way that it is doing. He pointed out that the Government have removed councils' duty to conduct assessments of need for facilities, education and health, and he urged them to put an end to the drift, get a grip and not kick the issue into the long grass.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) expressed his frustration with the reputational damage done to the majority of the Traveller community by a small minority. He mentioned the £150,000 to £300,000 a year that is spent on legal costs and cleaning up. In tight financial times for local authorities, that is clearly a great source of frustration, particularly for settled residents who see money spent on what they would consider unnecessary issues. We should consider his point about how to secure sites to prevent future abuse. He also discussed council and police powers, the ability to move encampments, and ways to get those who cause the damage to meet the clear-up costs, because as it stands the law is not fit for purpose.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) spoke about the removal of the administrative borders of local authority areas—as did many other Members—to allow police forces to tackle cross-border illegal activity to alleviate pressure at unauthorised sites. He urged tougher and swifter action against those who act illegally.

I was pleased to hear the contribution by my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams), because it changed the general tone of the debate. He gave a much more compassionate and broad consideration of the debate subject, highlighting the fact that those in greatest need are the least likely to access the support services that they need. He said we should ensure that GPs should not be able to refuse to register those from the Gypsy, Traveller and Romany community because they have no fixed abode. He also mentioned how the Government talk a good game on tackling burning injustices but fail in this arena.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) said how important it was for those in public office not to make sweeping generalisations. She said that we should not make negative statements without the evidence to support them. She reiterated how fundamental education is to our society and spoke about how marginalised children from the Gypsy, Romany and Traveller communities are in schools, affecting their ability to attain academically, to integrate into society and to access public facilities. She also mentioned the case of a child having to move schools 11 times because of bullying. I found that particularly distressing, because in any other circumstances there would be outrage from us all.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) said it was important to support people in how they choose to live, but that we must not allow those who break the law to get away with it—we must consider the effect they have on other people. *[Interruption.]* I appreciate the notice about the lack of time. I just wish to mention very quickly the contributions by my hon. Friends the Members for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock), for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) and for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter). They all made incredibly important points and I am sorry that I cannot go into them in more detail.

In closing, will the Minister please think again and restore the requirement for local authorities to assess these communities' housing needs? How many sites have been established since 2015 and how much of the £60 million for affordable housing has been allocated to new or refurbished Traveller sites?

9.53 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have contributed to the debate. Given the very limited amount of time available to me, I might not be able to address every single issue, but it is absolutely clear that there are strong feelings around the House. I, too, feel extremely strongly about this issue: so many of the challenges that colleagues have mentioned—particularly those relating to illegal encampments—remind me of the challenges I have faced in my own constituency, Nuneaton. Many of my residents have suffered in a very similar way from illegal encampments.

I am therefore very pleased that today we have signalled our intention to seek a call for evidence to review the way in which existing powers are enforced and to understand what more can be done to tackle many of the issues raised in the debate. However, I caution Members because, whatever powers this House has given, and may give, it is important to say that those powers will inevitably be enforced at local level and that enforcement is the key to success in this regard.

Let me deal with a number of points that have been made. There was a strong feeling among Members that there should be parity among all communities in respect of the planning system. That was certainly a point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) and my hon. Friend the Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena). They also said that they expected enforcement powers to be used in a proportionate but fair manner by local authorities. They were also concerned about the green belt—we all value the sanctity of the green belt. We have made it clear that temporary or permanent Traveller sites are not appropriate green-belt development and that the personal circumstances and needs of particular families are unlikely to clearly outweigh the harm to the green belt. I heard what my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) said in relation to the village

of Wolvey. He set out his feelings with regard to the national planning policy framework, and he should consider making a contribution on that matter during the call for evidence.

Members have also mentioned unauthorised encampments. The hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) made the extremely important point that everybody, no matter who they are or whatever part of the community they represent, must comply with the rule of law. My hon. Friends the Members for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) and for Dudley South (Mike Wood) also covered that important point. My hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire also mentioned the challenges of private sites that he has experienced in his constituency.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rugby mentioned another important point: the Warwickshire protocol that is being developed for dealing with illegal Traveller encampments. It is important that we see strong local leadership to use the powers that are already available.

In the call for evidence, one matter is likely to feature very strongly. My right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford and my hon. Friends the Members for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford), for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe), for Wells (James Heapey), for Southend West (Sir David Amess) and for Clacton (Giles Watling) talked about other jurisdictions and what has been done in Ireland in relation to the problem with illegal encampments.

I do not have a great deal of time to cover all the other points that were made. I wish to bring some balance to this debate, because this is not just about the challenges that we have with Gypsies and Travellers in our constituency. It is also about a proportionate response. As we have heard, the challenges that we face are generally from a small group of the various Gypsy and Traveller communities, and we need to ensure that we balance this with fairness so that Gypsies and Travellers do not face issues such as hate crime, which have been mentioned. We need to be clear that, whomever it is perpetrated against, hate crime is not acceptable in our society. The issue of life chances for Gypsies and Travellers was also mentioned. Much of what has been said tonight will be picked up during the race disparity audit that is being considered by the Government.

To come back to the central point, we are absolutely committed to ensuring that Gypsies and Travellers are fully integrated in our society and that they enjoy the rights of our society, but as important are the responsibilities that everybody in our society has. I am confident from tonight's debate that we will be able to take this matter forward. I look forward to hon. Members contributing to the important call for evidence that is being undertaken by the Government.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Gypsies and Travellers and local communities.

Air Rifles

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

Mr Speaker: As I am often moved to observe, and I observe again, if there are Members who, quite unaccountably, are leaving the Chamber because, for reasons of lack of taste or other considerations, they do not wish to be present to hear the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) on the Adjournment, I trust that they will do so speedily and quietly so that the rest of us can hear the hon. Lady.

10 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): Mr Speaker, thank you for allowing this debate on the use and control of air rifles. This is a subject that the House has debated in the past, but which continues to have serious consequences for many of those we represent. Too many lives have been unnecessarily lost and too many serious injuries have been inflicted upon innocent civilians. Sadly, a large proportion of these victims are children and young people. We cannot ignore the issue and we need to do something about it.

Let me explain my interest in the issue. On 1 July 2016, my young constituent Harry Studley—then just 18 months old—was shot in the head and critically injured with an air rifle. Thanks to the efforts of the local emergency services, including the swift intervention of the Great Western air ambulance and the clinical staff at Bristol Children’s Hospital, little Harry pulled through despite his injuries. Harry’s parents, Ed and Amy, have explained to me that he has been left partially sighted, suffers memory loss and has post-traumatic seizures as a result of the incident. A local man was convicted of causing Harry grievous bodily harm and jailed for two years.

Many people living in Bristol and the west country will recall hearing about this devastating incident in the local media. Parents listening to the heart-breaking details of the case would understandably have asked, “Could this happen to my family? Could the incident have been prevented? What can be done to make these weapons safer? Should these weapons be banned?”. Those are all valid questions and there are more. In young Harry’s case, it was suggested that the weapon was being cleaned. Would legislation making trigger locks compulsory on these weapons have prevented this dreadful and life-changing incident? We will never know in this specific case, but we have a solemn duty as elected representatives to scrutinise, to keep asking questions on behalf of those we serve and to bring greater safety.

As Harry continues to recover, I pay tribute to his family. They have shown great resilience in the face of adversity. Crucially, they have been tenacious and determined that we should all learn from the incident that transformed their futures. As part of this work, they have closely monitored further incidents with air weapons. They were encouraged by the debate held in Westminster Hall in September 2016 by my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson), whose long-standing interest in the issue dates from 1999 when a constituent of his, aged just 13, was killed. The 2016 debate called for the introduction of trigger locks, the safe storage of air weapons and a review of the impact of recent Scottish legislation, which I will come to later.

In a written response to my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn, the then Home Office Minister responsible indicated that the Government would “review the current air gun leaflet”

and

“keep a close eye on the introduction of air weapons licensing in Scotland”,

an issue to which I now turn.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on bringing this topic to the House for consideration. She will know, after discussions I had with her earlier, that Northern Ireland has very strict legislation covering air rifles and, indeed, all weapons. I say kindly and carefully to her that the British Association for Shooting and Conservation and the Countryside Alliance have laid out strict protocols and rules within the remit of the law. Does she feel that the law in England and the UK is sufficient to stop these things happening?

Karin Smyth: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, for the information he has shared with me and for his expertise in this area. The point I will come on to is that we need to learn in England from what happens in Northern Ireland and Scotland and that children in Bristol South should be afforded the same level of security as children there, and I will return to that.

Hon. Members will know that, following a series of tragic incidents involving air weapons, the Scottish Government acted to address the problem. Under the Air Weapons and Licensing (Scotland) Act 2015, it has been an offence since the start of this year to use, possess, purchase or acquire an air weapon without holding an air weapon certificate. It is a condition of that licence that weapons are securely stored in order that access and possession cannot be gained by a person who is not authorised. The licence application also requires the disclosure of criminal convictions, and the police must be satisfied that the applicant can possess an air weapon

“without danger to the public safety or to the peace”

before issuing an air weapon certificate. That is over and beyond section 21 of the Firearms Act 1968, under which a person who has been convicted of an offence may be prohibited from possessing firearms, including air weapons.

In the run-up to the change in the law, 20,000 air weapons were surrendered to the authorities in Scotland and destroyed—20,000 fewer potentially lethal weapons were on the streets, and I think the House will agree that that makes Scotland safer. However, in England, just since the start of May 2017, there have been incidents involving air weapons and children in Carlisle, Bury, Chelmsford, Ipswich, Exeter and, most tragically, Loughborough, where, in August, a five-year-old boy was reportedly shot and killed with an air rifle—another tragic child death. In spring 2016, a 13-year-old boy was killed in Bury St Edmunds.

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for bringing what I consider a very important issue to the House. I pay tribute to that young man, and to his family and friends, all of whom have come to see

me, and we have discussed some of the items the hon. Lady is raising today. Does she also agree that guns that are not manufactured by licensed manufacturers cause a problem and need to be looked at? There are also issues around hair triggers, magazines that do not necessarily show that they have been discharged and ammunition being left in the chamber that is not known about. Does she agree that those are the sort of things we should be looking at?

Karin Smyth: I am grateful for that intervention, and I certainly want to learn from other hon. Members' experience and work in this area. I assured the Studley family in my constituency that, on issues such as this, hon. Members will work together cross party to achieve the best legislation.

In his speech last year, my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn informed the House that 17 children had died as a result of air weapons in the last 27 years. Sadly, it appears that that number has risen again, and I repeat that we need to do something about that. I ask the Minister to reconsider the response given last year to my right hon. Friend; it is simply not good enough to review the text of a leaflet.

In this House, on 20 April, the then Leader of the House of Commons, the right hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr Lidington), told me the Government have "no plans to ban or licence"—[*Official Report*, 20 April 2017; Vol. 624, c. 801.]

air weapons, on the basis that misuse applies only to a small minority of people. Many of the people we represent would argue that many of the laws that currently protect them from all sorts of heinous acts are in place to protect them from a small minority, and even if only a small minority is affected, the consequences of their actions are grave and merit our attention, regardless of the numbers.

Many hon. Members share an interest in animal welfare, and I would add that, since successfully securing this debate, I have been contacted by Cats Protection, the International Fund for Animal Welfare and others.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. I became aware of this issue when cats in my constituency were shot and I looked into it. We now know that over 1,800 cats have been shot since 2012. Cats Protection has a live petition, which already has 72,000 signatures, calling for the licensing of airguns. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is time we updated our legislation in line with Scotland and Northern Ireland?

Karin Smyth: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her intervention and I know from my reading of previous debates that she has done a lot of work on this issue. I shall certainly be asking for more updates on the comparison with Scotland to identify whether that is the right way to go.

Most of the law in England and Wales on air weapons dates from the 1960s and it is time properly to re-examine the legislation to see whether it is fit for the 21st century. When an issue has such a devastating effect on the lives of families with such regularity, I would expect the Government to be considering such action already. It is for the Minister to decide what any review should cover, but at the very least I would expect a detailed consideration

of licensing in the light of the change to the law in Scotland; of whether the fitting of trigger locks should be mandatory for all new air weapons sold; and of whether the reasonable precautions requirement on all airgun owners for the safe storage of air weapons and ammunition is adequate. My constituents are also interested in laws governing the registration and transfer of these weapons and would be grateful for an explanation of the current position and any proposed changes.

I am grateful for the opportunity to raise these questions and stress in closing that the purpose of my securing this debate is not to ban air weapons outright. It is about their safe use. I want children and young people in my constituency to be protected from future tragedies like those that have been all too common in recent years. Surely Bristol South's children deserve the same protection as children living in Scotland.

10.11 pm

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) not just on securing the debate but on her persistence in pursuing an issue of great importance and on how she has framed tonight's debate on safer use of airguns. I know that she has been concerned about the issue for some time following the appalling injury suffered by Harry Studley in her constituency. He was just 18 months old when he was shot with an air rifle in July of last year, and I join the hon. Lady in applauding the resilience of his family and the actions of the emergency services in saving his life.

As will become clear in my speech, the Government are not remotely complacent on this issue, but it is important to make the point early on that we have strong firearms controls in this country. They are there for a purpose—to minimise the risk of harm to the public—and, within the general consensus about the importance of these controls, the regulation of air weapons has long been a matter of debate, with lawful users arguing that they should be allowed to enjoy their property without unnecessary restrictions, and others arguing for tougher regulation to improve public safety.

As the hon. Lady rightly pointed out, the recent decision by the Scottish Government to introduce a licensing regime for lower-powered air weapons has quite rightly led to a renewed focus on the regulatory position in England and Wales. She will know as well as I do that a balance has to be struck, particularly regarding weapons that present a lower risk and weapons that are used in well-regulated environments such as shooting clubs.

I have listened carefully to the hon. Lady's remarks this evening, and I have also given careful consideration to the report presented by the coroner in relation to the tragic death of Benjamin Wragge, who was 13 when he was accidentally shot with an air weapon in 2016. I have recently written to the coroner and confirmed my intention to review the regulation of air weapons in England and Wales. I think that this is an appropriate time to take stock of the regulatory position and assess whether the current controls, which are already strong, continue to be appropriate and effective.

Jim Shannon: The contributions from Members who have personal knowledge of the matter have made this a difficult Adjournment debate. When it comes to looking

[Jim Shannon]

further into legislative change, will the Minister assure hon. Members that consultation will take place with shooting organisations such as the British Association for Shooting and Conservation and the Countryside Alliance?

Mr Hurd: There is no point in having a consultation if it does not include the opinions of those with a voice and an educated view, so I give the hon. Gentleman that assurance. I also provide the assurance that I will be meeting members of Benjamin Wragge's family later this year. I will listen carefully to their views, as I will to those of their Member of Parliament, my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), who has written to me on the matter.

I intend to look carefully at the existing controls on air weapons, including how best to ensure that such weapons are stored safely and securely, so that they do not get into the hands of children. The hon. Member for Bristol South suggested that features such as trigger locks should be used, or that air weapons should be required to be stored in a locked cabinet. Those issues need to be looked at in some detail.

I should make it clear to the House that, although I think that a review of air weapon regulation is important and timely, we will do so against the background of existing controls that are, by all international comparisons, very robust and of a long-term decline in the number of crimes involving air weapons. For the record, I will set out some of the existing controls. First, the law recognises that some air weapons are more dangerous than others. In particular, only lower-powered air weapons can be held without a licence. More dangerous air weapons need to be licensed by the police. In addition, I believe that we have robust controls to prevent unauthorised access.

Jo Churchill: On a point of clarification, if a lower-velocity weapon is adapted to give it a higher velocity—I think that is, if not simple to do, quite easily achievable—how do we regulate for that, if there is no form of checking of how air rifles have been adapted?

Mr Hurd: My hon. Friend predictably makes a very good point. That is exactly the kind of circumstance that the review needs to look at, to make sure that regulation and controls are on top of existing practice in the market.

The point that I am trying to make to the House is that existing controls, particularly in relation to preventing unauthorised access, seem robust, on the face of it. The sale of air weapons to those aged under 18 is prohibited, and except in special circumstances under-18s cannot possess them. Air weapons can be sold only by registered firearms dealers. These dealers must keep records of all sales, including details of the purchaser, and they must complete the sale in person. In respect of online sales, although advertising on the internet and collecting payment via websites is permitted, the final transfer of the air weapon must be completed face to face and not through the post. That is an important safeguard against under-18s accessing such weapons online.

Those restrictions help us to reduce the risk of misuse. Alongside that, we know that accidents involving air weapons can occur, and that when they do, the consequences

can be tragic and absolutely devastating. This is why it is vital that all who are in lawful possession of air weapons store them and handle them securely and safely.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): The hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) mentioned the case that occurred in Loughborough over the summer, although I am not going to talk about it because it is still subject to investigation and potentially other proceedings. She highlighted that a number of incidents have, tragically, involved young children. Will the Minister consider—perhaps this is something that we might write to him about in a review—whether there is an argument for saying that when air rifles are handled while children are around, there should be extra requirements on the behaviour of adults, if I may put it like that? That might provide an additional safeguard.

Mr Hurd: I thank my right hon. Friend for her intervention. I have a huge amount of sympathy for that instinct, and I encourage her to write in along those lines, as she suggests.

The Home Office provides guidance on the practical steps that owners can take to secure air weapons and on how to handle them. We will shortly—genuinely shortly—be publishing a revised edition of the guidance, which will be available online and to new purchasers as a leaflet to help reinforce the important safety messages. We will also promote the messages in magazines that are aimed at air weapon users. It is an offence for a person to fail to take reasonable steps to prevent unauthorised access to their airguns by those under the age of 18. That measure was introduced to help prevent more tragic accidents, following a number of deaths involving young people under the age of 18 playing with air weapons.

When I look at what is in place to avoid the misuse of air weapons, I see a robust set of regulations. It is an offence for any person

“to use an air weapon for firing a pellet beyond the boundaries of the premises. It is an offence for a supervising adult to allow a person under the age of 18 to use an air weapon for firing a pellet beyond the boundaries of premises. It is an offence... to have an air weapon in a public place without a reasonable excuse... It is an offence to trespass with an air weapon... It is an offence to have an air weapon if you are prohibited from possessing a firearm... It is an offence to fire an air weapon without lawful authority or excuse within 50 feet... of the centre of a public road in such a way as to cause a road user to be injured, interrupted or endangered. It is an offence to intentionally or recklessly kill certain wild animals and birds... It is an offence to knowingly cause a pet animal to suffer unnecessarily, which could be committed by shooting at a pet animal. It is an offence to have an air weapon with intent to damage or to destroy property. It is also an offence to have air weapons and be reckless as to whether property would be damaged or destroyed. It is an offence to have an air weapon with intent to endanger life.”

Looking at the statistics, it is clear that most offences involving air weapons—around two-thirds—relate to criminal damage. As for death or serious injury relating to air weapon offences, there were around 30 serious injuries relating to air weapons or their misuse in 2015-16. Although the number of air weapon offences has decreased significantly, reducing by 77% between 2003 and 2016, there was a rise last year, so it is clear that we cannot be complacent, which is why I have instructed the review that I have mentioned this evening. I hope that it has the support of the hon. Member for Bristol South.

Karin Smyth: I am encouraged by the Minister's remarks. I made a point about the comparison with Scotland, so will his review of the regulation look at and learn from the evidence from Scotland and, indeed, from Northern Ireland?

Mr Hurd: The short answer is yes. There has been a significant intervention in Scotland and it would be quite wrong for us not to consider the evidence. The scale and circumstances are obviously different, but it would be wrong for us to ignore it completely, as my predecessors have indicated.

In conclusion, if I have not already been clear, let me be quite clear now that the Government recognise that there are legitimate uses for air weapons such as shooting sports, which the hon. Lady also confirmed in her remarks, and that a balance needs to be struck between the freedom to pursue such interests and regulation

or control. The existing controls on air weapons are helping to reduce their misuse and the occurrence of tragic accidents involving these weapons, but whenever accidents do occur—I have looked back on the roll call of tragic incidents, which often involve children—it is right to look again at the controls to see whether further changes are required or justified. As I said earlier, I intend to undertake a review of the regulation of air weapons in England and Wales to assess whether any further measures may be necessary to protect the public.

Let me close by again thanking the hon. Lady for securing this debate and for how she framed it. I hope that my remarks have satisfied her that the Government take this issue very seriously indeed.

Question put and agreed to.

10.24 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 9 October 2017

DEFENCE

Contingent Liability

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Harriett Baldwin): I have today laid before Parliament a departmental minute describing a Contingent Liability (CL) in the region of £150 million associated with Programme HADES.

Programme HADES will provide the continued delivery of motor transport, supply, aircraft and ground engineering, and airfield support services. HADES will replace expiring unit-specific multi-activity contracts at a number of units from 1 April 2018. The programme will ensure continuity of service provision at minimum cost and is essential to support strategic defence and security review 2015 outcomes.

The maximum CL is in the region of £150 million, which ensured healthy competition from prospective tenderers. There is also a further CL of £643,000 associated with the indemnity given to contractors for terminal redundancy liability associated with ex-authority staff.

The Treasury has approved the proposal in principle. If, during the period of 14 parliamentary sitting days beginning on the date on which this minute was laid before the House, a Member signifies an objection by giving notice of a parliamentary question or a motion relating to the minute, or by otherwise raising the matter in the House, final approval will be withheld pending an examination of the objection.

[HCWS144]

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Commonwealth Games 2022

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley): I wish to inform the House that, on 9 October 2017, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport laid a minute recording the submission of a bid by Commonwealth Games England, Birmingham City Council, the West Midlands Combined Authority and DCMS to host the 2022 Commonwealth Games in Birmingham.

Birmingham's bid presents an excellent opportunity to demonstrate the very best of global Britain to the world, showcasing the UK as a destination for international trade, education and tourism. It has the full backing of Government and will not only help grow the economy in the west midlands and beyond but leave a strong sports legacy by upgrading facilities to benefit both elite athletes and the local community.

The Government will provide around 75% of the net budget costs of delivering the Games and an underwrite of the total event budget, as well as a series of further

guarantees which the CGF requests accompany the bid. The bid, therefore, creates contingent liabilities for the UK Government in relation to Commonwealth Games.

The minute notes these liabilities as Government's commitment to provide funding for the Games, underwrite the costs, and provide a number of further guarantees relating to the successful planning and delivery of the event. These contingent liabilities will only take effect in the event of a successful bid and our agreement of a hosting contract with the Commonwealth Games Federation.

The bid was submitted on 30 September 2017 and, due to the much shorter than usual timeframe in which to prepare the bid, I apologise that there was insufficient time to notify Parliament of our intention before the House returned.

Parliamentarians may signify objections by giving notice of a parliamentary question or by otherwise raising the matter in Parliament by 31 October. Final approval to proceed with incurring the liability will be withheld pending an examination of the objection.

[HCWS146]

EDUCATION

Student Finance Update

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Joseph Johnson): I am today confirming the earnings threshold above which individuals are required to make contributions to the cost of their education from April 2018. I am also confirming the maximum tuition fees for the 2018-19 academic year.

Earnings threshold

The earnings threshold will be increased from 6 April 2018. From its current level of £21,000 the threshold will rise to £25,000 for the 2018-19 financial year. Thereafter it will be adjusted annually in line with average earnings.

The new threshold will apply to those who have already taken out and will take out loans for tuition and living costs for full-time and part-time undergraduate courses in the post-2012 system and those who took out or will take an advanced learner loan for a further education course.

The lower threshold for variable interest rates for post-2012 student loans will also rise to £25,000 on 6 April 2018, and the upper threshold will rise to £45,000 from £41,000 on the same date. Both the repayment and variable interest thresholds will be adjusted annually in line with average earnings thereafter. In 2018-19 around 600,000 borrowers will benefit from the threshold changes. Most of those 600,000 borrowers will both make lower contributions and have a lower rate of interest applied.

The repayment thresholds applicable to pre-2012 student loans, the older mortgage style loans and master's loans are not affected by these changes.

Tuition fees

Maximum tuition fee caps will be maintained at 2017-18 academic year levels in the 2018-19 academic year.

For HEFCE funded providers that have a current Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) award and have an access agreement with the Office for Fair Access

(OFFA), the maximum tuition fee for full-time courses will remain £9,250 in 2018-19. For HEFCE funded providers that have a current TEF award but do not have an access agreement with OFFA, the maximum tuition fee for full-time courses will be £6,165 in 2018-19. For HEFCE funded providers that do not have a current TEF award, the maximum tuition fee for full-time courses in 2018-19 will remain £9,000 for providers with an OFFA access agreement and £6,000 for providers without an OFFA access agreement.

Maximum fee loans for all new students and eligible continuing students who started their full-time courses at publicly funded providers on or after 1 September 2012 will be maintained at £9,250 in the 2018-19 academic year.

For continuing students who started their full-time courses before September 2012, maximum tuition fee and fee loan caps at publicly funded providers in 2018-19 will be maintained at £3,465.

For HEFCE funded providers that have a current TEF award and have an access agreement with OFFA, the maximum tuition fee for part-time courses will be £6,935 in 2018-19. For HEFCE funded providers that have a current TEF award, but do not have an access agreement with OFFA, the maximum tuition fee for part-time courses will be £4,625 in 2018-19. For HEFCE funded providers that do not have a current TEF award, the maximum tuition fee for part-time courses in 2018-19 will be £6,750 for providers with an OFFA access agreement and £4,500 for providers without an OFFA access agreement.

Maximum fee loans for all new students and eligible continuing students who started their part-time courses at publicly funded providers on or after 1 September 2012 will be maintained at £6,935 in 2018-19.

For all new students and eligible continuing students who started their full-time courses on or after 1 September 2012 and are undertaking courses at private providers that have a current TEF award, the maximum fee loan will be £6,165 in 2018-19. For private providers that do not have a current TEF award, the maximum fee loan for full-time courses will be £6,000 in 2018/19.

For all new students and eligible continuing students who started their part-time courses on or after 1 September 2012 and are undertaking courses at private providers that have a current TEF award, the maximum fee loan will be £4,625 in 2018-19. For private providers that do not have a current TEF award, the maximum fee loan for part-time courses in 2018-19 will be £4,500.

The Government will set out further steps on HE student financing in due course.

[HCWS145]

HEALTH

Mental Health Act Review

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): The Government have commissioned an independent review of mental health legislation and practice to tackle the issue of mental health detention.

There have been concerns that detention rates under the Mental Health Act are too high. The number of detentions has been rising year on year, and last year on average there were 180 cases a day where people were

sectioned under the terms of the act. People from black and minority ethnic populations are disproportionately affected, with black people in particular being almost four times more likely than white people to be detained.

The Government are committed to improving mental health services and ensuring that people with mental health problems receive the treatment and support they need, when they need it. This can mean that people need to be made subject to the Mental Health Act—that is, be detained or ‘sectioned’. In these cases, our dedicated professional staff—including psychiatrists, nurses, social workers, and the police—work tirelessly to ensure that people are treated with dignity under the Act, and that their liberty and autonomy are respected as far as possible.

Professor Sir Simon Wessely, former president of the Royal College of Psychiatrists, will lead the review which will deliver recommendations for change to the Government. Sir Simon will look at the evidence, review practice, and above all consider the needs of service users and their families, and how best the system can help and support them. He will identify improvements in how the Act is used in practice, as well as how we might need to change the Act itself. Vice chairs will be appointed to work with Sir Simon and ensure the leadership of the review has comprehensive professional expertise whilst also being representative of service users and others affected by the Mental Health Act.

Following consultation with stakeholders, Sir Simon will produce an interim report identifying priorities for the review’s work in early 2018, and develop a final report containing detailed recommendations on its priorities, by autumn 2018.

Further detail on the independent review, including its terms of reference, can be found at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-announces-review-to-tackle-detention-of-those-with-mental-ill-health>.

[HCWS143]

Infected Blood: Government Response

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jackie Doyle-Price): In 2016 the Government decided to improve the way we support people who have suffered as a result of the infected blood tragedy of the 1970s and 1980s. At this time the Government committed an additional £125 million of support to those affected, more than doubling the Department of Health’s annual spending on the scheme over the spending review period to April 2021.

Following the 2016 consultation we announced new annual payments for people with chronic hepatitis C (stage 1 infection) and a new one-off payment for bereaved partners and spouses; a new process for those with stage 1 infection to apply for the higher payment amount; and increased annual payments from 2018-19.

In March 2017 we launched a second consultation, looking at the new voluntary process by which those infected by stage 1 Hepatitis C can apply for higher annual payments (the Special Category Mechanism). The Special Category Mechanism aims to benefit beneficiaries with hepatitis C stage 1 who consider their infection, or its treatment, to have a substantial and long-term impact on their ability to carry out routine daily activities.

The consultation was open to all beneficiaries and other interested parties across the UK to comment on our proposals. The consultation closed on 17 April 2017.

The Government have listened carefully to the consultation responses, analysed pre and post-consultation evidence from other sources, and reviewed consultation proposals in line with respondents' views and evidence. Following this, the consultation response sets out the Government's plans for reform, which are summarised below:

Introduction of planned uplifts in annual payments from 2018-19. All beneficiaries will receive an increase in annual payments from 2018-19.

A new Special Category Mechanism (SCM) for those with hepatitis C infection at stage 1 in November 2017.

The introduction of a single programme of discretionary support for all—infected and bereaved.

An increase in the overall level of funding for discretionary support from 2018-19.

All annual payments will include the winter fuel payment.

Addition of type 2 or 3 cryoglobulinemia accompanied by membranoproliferative glomerulonephritis, (MPGN), to the current hepatitis C stage 2 conditions.

A letter will be sent to the beneficiaries of the English scheme to make them aware of these changes, and advise them on how to access the consultation response, a link to which is also provided as part of this statement. When the SCM process opens beneficiaries with hepatitis C at stage 1 will receive a letter telling them how to apply.

For the first time, all beneficiaries of any of the current five schemes will be receiving support from a single scheme. As previously announced the NHS Business Services Authority (NHSBSA) will become the new single scheme administrator in England, with effect from 1 November 2017. While this transition takes place, annual and discretionary payments and services will continue to be made by the current schemes to ensure a smooth transition to the new scheme with minimum impact on the beneficiaries.

The Government strongly believe that all those who are affected by this tragedy should be supported by a fair and transparent scheme that focuses on their welfare and long-term independence. With this additional funding and scheme reform, the support provided to those affected by the infected blood tragedy will be greater and fairer than ever before.

A copy of the full consultation and the related equality analysis can be found on gov.uk using the following link: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/infected-blood-support-special-category-mechanism>.

[HCWS142]

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

DFID Supplier Review

The Secretary of State for International Development (Priti Patel): The UK is an acknowledged world leader in the provision of development and humanitarian aid. Our aid budget acts not only in the interests of the world's poorest, but also in Britain's long term national interest.

Our global leadership in development requires continuing efforts to improve value for money, efficiency, innovation and effectiveness. I am therefore introducing tough new

measures to ensure that the aid managed by DFID contractors delivers the best possible results for the world's poorest people, provides value for taxpayers' money and upholds high standards of ethical and professional behaviour.

A tough new DFID supply partner code of conduct will cover commercial requirements, ethical behaviours, transparency obligations, environmental sustainability and social responsibility. DFID will monitor suppliers' implementation of the code, with legally enforceable sanctions for non-compliance.

DFID will introduce greater transparency to drive down costs along its supply chains. DFID contracts will now include tough new measures to bear down even harder on costs, fees and overheads, and to provide greater transparency in contracts and throughout supply chains. These include open book accounting clauses enabling DFID to obtain, use and verify information from its suppliers to make sure we have access to full financial information on costs to enable us to fully challenge value for money. It will also include a clause which we can use if necessary to intervene to ensure a fair deal for the taxpayer.

DFID will open up procurement to new entrants in the UK and overseas, simplifying documentation and processes and making greater use of digital platforms and social media to allow potential suppliers to access contract opportunities. A programme of business engagement events in the UK and overseas will facilitate engagement by new suppliers and the Department will also carry out research into the specific barriers facing by local suppliers in developing countries in accessing contract opportunities.

DFID will level the playing field for small suppliers and sub-contractors, ending the imposition of agreements which restrict sub-contractors' ability to work for other suppliers. It will introduce new protections for small suppliers and sub-contractors operating in consortia, including contract checks to eradicate so called "bid candy" practices in which major suppliers drop sub-contractors once they have won the contract. We will continue to break up suitable tenders into manageable sizes and services to better enable smaller suppliers to compete.

A robust, comprehensive approach to supplier management will enable the Department to hold suppliers to account across their entire portfolio of work with DFID, bringing DFID into line with best practice in the private sector. This will allow DFID to challenge delivery partners more strongly on value for money, identify underlying performance problems and tap into a supplier's wider areas of expertise.

DFID will put more information in the public domain, so that members of the public can assure themselves directly that DFID's aid is being used effectively. This will include a policy on allowable costs in day rates paid to consultants and annual league tables of supplier performance. We will publish annual information on our commercial practices, setting out performance during the year and making further recommendations for improvement.

These reforms will complement the detailed line-by-line review of every programme in DFID's portfolio, either already approved or in design phase, carried out by my ministerial team. They will help to ensure maximum

impact from the development programmes delivered by DFID's contractors, complementing the work done in the civil society partnership review to strengthen value for money from grants to civil society organisations, and in the multilateral development review to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the international development system.

[HCWS141]

NORTHERN IRELAND

Northern Ireland Update

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (James Brokenshire): The DUP and Sinn Féin continue their discussions towards the formation of an Executive in Northern Ireland. The parties have reduced the number of issues between them—including on some aspects of language and culture—but clear differences still remain. The Government are committed to continuing to work with all the Northern Ireland parties and the Irish Government, consistent with the three-stranded approach, towards reaching agreement quickly. I have been in regular contact with party leaders and Irish Foreign Minister Simon Coveney and will have further meetings in Belfast this week. The Prime Minister has been actively involved throughout this process. This has included her recent meeting with the Taoiseach and discussions with the leaders of the DUP and Sinn Féin. She shares the high priority which I place on the Government being ready and willing to work tirelessly to support the restoration of the Northern Ireland devolved institutions.

It is crucial that, with this support, the parties continue to do their utmost to reach an agreement which allows them to make those decisions which are important to

the people of Northern Ireland. The parties have shown leadership and the ability to look beyond their differences in the past to resolve significant challenges which have separated them. I have urged the parties to focus their remaining efforts and energies on closing the outstanding gaps swiftly to find a resolution which will pave the way for the restoration of devolved government in Northern Ireland. With the right spirit of compromise this can be achieved and now is the time to come together and reach agreement.

I stand ready to bring forward legislation to enable an Executive to be formed quickly once agreement has been reached. But the timeframe for this is not indefinite. As Secretary of State, I have a responsibility for good governance and political stability in Northern Ireland—which has now been without a full Executive for 10 months. If devolved Government is not restored in the next few weeks, I will consider carefully what steps are needed in the best interests of the people, the voluntary sector, public services and businesses in Northern Ireland. As a minimum, this would involve introducing legislation later this month to set a budget for 2017-18 putting Northern Ireland on a path towards greater UK Government intervention in its day to day affairs.

We are not at this point yet. It is in the best interests of Northern Ireland and its people to have strategic decisions taken by locally elected politicians in the interests of the whole community. That is why the Government remain resolute in their efforts with the parties to secure the outcome which a majority of Northern Ireland want and need: the restoration of devolution. Ultimately, it is for the parties to reach agreement, but Northern Ireland has come so far and I encourage the parties to keep this firmly in mind as they work towards finding that resolution.

[HCWS147]

Petitions

Monday 9 October 2017

OBSERVATIONS

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Climate Change

The petition of residents of Macclesfield,

Declares that climate changes impacts upon both people and places; further that on the global stage the UK should exercise leadership in the implementation of the Paris Agreement, ensure coordination between government departments in the production and implementation of plans for emissions reduction with particular emphasis on local energy, cutting energy waste in homes and reducing the impact of vehicles on the environment.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Prime Minister to give priority to the urgent issue of global Climate Change.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by David Rutley, *Official Report*, 19 July 2017; Vol. 627, c. 8P.]

[P002047]

Observations from the Minister of State, Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Claire Perry):

Climate change is one of the most urgent and pressing challenges we face today, and the UK remains committed to demonstrating global leadership in tackling it.

The UK played a leading role in negotiating the Paris Agreement and the Prime Minister, along with other global leaders, has re-affirmed our strong commitment to the Paris Agreement and its swift implementation, as well as our view that the Agreement is irreversible. The Prime Minister has made clear that we believe that the Paris Agreement provides the right global framework for protecting the prosperity and security of future generations, while keeping energy affordable and secure for our citizens and businesses.

The UK has shown global leadership in cutting emissions while growing our economy. We have met the first carbon budget (2008-2012) and we are on track to meet the second (2013-2017) and third carbon budgets (2018-2022). In delivering these targets, we have led the world in reducing emissions while growing our economy. Since 1990, we have cut emissions by more than 40% while our economy has grown by two thirds. We were recently ranked by the independent Climate Action Network as the third best country in the world for tackling climate change, and PwC's Low Carbon Economy Index shows that the UK has been the fastest of any country in the G20 to decarbonise in 2016.

The UK is well placed to take advantage of the huge economic opportunities of the transition to a low carbon economy. Our early action on clean growth means that we have nurtured a broad range of low carbon industries, including some sectors in which we have world-leading positions. Around 430,000 people are employed in the

low carbon sector and its supply chain, and a recent report for the Committee on Climate Change estimated that the UK low carbon economy could grow by an estimated 11% per year between 2015 and 2030—four times faster than the rest of the economy.

Our leadership covers a range of sectors. For example, our financial sector is already a world-leader in green finance. We recently announced a package of measures, including the establishment of a Green Finance Taskforce, to build on our leadership position.

The UK's International Climate Fund (ICF) is the UK's primary international instrument to help deliver the Paris Climate Agreement; we are committed to spend at least £5.8 billion between 2016 and 2021 to build renewable energy projects, halt deforestation and increase private investment in low carbon technologies around the world. Over the past five years, the ICF has supported 34 million people to cope with the effects of climate change and improved access to clean energy for 12 million people. The finance has also installed more than 400 MW of clean energy capacity, reduced or avoided 9.2 million tonnes of CO₂ and mobilised £2.2 billion public finance and £500 million private finance for climate change purposes in developing countries.

As a part of the ICF, the UK led the way in bringing the international community together to set up the first major global climate funds, the \$8.3 billion Climate Investment Funds (CIFs). CIFs have:

- Driven low carbon climate resilient development in 73 countries, leveraging \$45 billion of co-financing and creating over 9,000 jobs in the Clean Technology Fund (CTF) alone;
- Embedded national climate planning in governments across the world;
- Shifted Global Finance Architecture and raised global reporting standards.

The UK also leads the world on International Development. In 2015 we were the only G7 country to achieve the UN target of spending 0.7% of Gross National Income as Official Development Assistance (ODA). This 0.7% commitment has been enshrined in UK law since 2015—demonstrating the UK's moral commitment to help the billions of people around the world who live in poverty.

Our Clean Growth Strategy will set out our proposals for decarbonising the UK economy through the 2020s, building on the impressive progress to date.

Climate change objectives and obligations

The petition of the residents of Dulwich and West Norwood,

Declares that there is widespread concern that the Government is not on track to meet the fourth or fifth carbon budgets; welcomes the Prime Minister's continued verbal commitment to the Paris Agreement; notes that in order to meet the UK's commitment to achieve the carbon budget action is necessary; further notes that the Committee on Climate Change reported in June 2017 and concluded that the UK can successfully navigate the transition to a growing, low-carbon economy but new policies to deliver that transition are overdue; and further notes that much domestic legislation for reducing emissions and tackling climate changes is either contingent on the UK's membership of the European Union or ends in or around 2020, including but not limited to the levy control framework supporting low carbon power,

fuel efficiency standards for new cars, renewable heat incentives, capital funding for flood defences to protect homes and businesses and targeted biodiversity plans to help build the resilience of the natural environment to climate change.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to lay before the House their plans for meeting the fourth and fifth carbon budgets, as well as committing to protecting existing environmental protections.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Helen Hayes, *Official Report*, 19 July 2017; Vol. 627, c. 949.]

[P002046]

Observations from the Minister of State, Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Claire Perry):

The Government are committed to tackling climate change and to the UK's Climate Change Act. The Act introduced carbon budgets to put us on a pathway to meet our legally binding 2050 target to reduce emissions by at least 80% against 1990 levels. We have met the first carbon budget (2008-2012) and we are on track to meet the second (2013-2017) and third carbon budgets (2018-2022).

In delivering these targets, we have led the world in reducing emissions while growing our economy. Since 1990, we have cut emissions by more than 40% while our economy has grown by two thirds—meaning that we have reduced emissions faster than any other G7 nation on a per person basis. We were recently ranked by the independent Climate Action Network as the third best country in the world for tackling climate change, and PwC's Low Carbon Economy Index shows that the UK has been the fastest of any country in the G20 to decarbonise in 2016.

The UK is also well placed to take advantage of the huge economic opportunities of the transition to a low carbon economy. Our early action on clean growth means that we have nurtured a broad range of low carbon industries, including some sectors in which we have world-leading positions. Around 430,000 people are employed in the low carbon sector and its supply chain, and a recent report for the Committee on Climate Change estimated that the UK low carbon economy could grow by an estimated 11% per year between 2015 and 2030—four times faster than the rest of the economy.

Our leadership covers a range of sectors. For example, our financial sector is already a world-leader in green finance. We recently announced a package of measures, including the establishment of a Green Finance Taskforce, to build on our leadership position.

The UK played a leading role in negotiating the Paris Agreement, and the Prime Minister has made clear that we believe that the Agreement provides the right global framework for protecting the prosperity and security of future generations, while keeping energy affordable and secure for our citizens and businesses.

Our Clean Growth Strategy will set out our proposals for decarbonising the UK economy through the 2020s, building on the impressive progress to date. We are working to ensure that our strategy is ambitious and robust, and will publish it shortly.

EDUCATION

School funding formula in Calderdale

The petition of residents of the UK,

Declares that the proposed national school funding formula would see reductions to the budgets of schools in Calderdale at a time when finances are already stretched; and further that an online petition on this matter received 1,042 signatures.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Education to reconsider the proposed national school funding formula to ensure that Calderdale schools do not lose out and that no school receives less than £4800 per pupil.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Holly Lynch, *Official Report*, 25 April 2017; Vol. 624, c. 1067.]

[P002034]

Observations from the Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb):

The Secretary of State announced the final details of the national funding formulae for schools and high needs on September 14, following the consultation launched in December 2016. All Calderdale schools will be allocated increased funding through the formula.

The introduction of the national funding formulae is supported by significant extra investment of £1.3 billion across 2018-19 and 2019-20, over and above the spending levels announced in the 2015 Autumn Statement. Core funding for schools and high needs will rise from almost £41 billion in 2017-18 to £42.4 billion in 2018-19 and £43.5 billion in 2019-20. This will allow us to maintain school and high needs funding in real terms per pupil for the next two years.

This additional investment has allowed us to build on the proposals in our consultation. As a result, the national funding formula will:

Recognise the challenges of the very lowest funded schools, by introducing a minimum per pupil funding level. Under the national funding formula, in 2019-20 all secondary schools will attract at least £4,800 per pupil, and all primary schools will attract at least £3,500 per pupil. In 2018-19, as a step towards these minimum funding levels, secondary schools will attract at least £4,600, and primary schools £3,300.

Provide a cash increase in respect of every school and every local area from April 2018. Final decisions on local distribution will be taken by local authorities, but under the national funding formula every school will attract at least 0.5% more per pupil in 2018-19, and 1% more in 2019-20, compared to its baseline.

Increase the basic amount of funding that every pupil will attract.

Provide significantly larger increases in respect of underfunded schools, of up to 3% per pupil in 2018-19 and a further 3% per pupil in 2019-20. The minimum per pupil funding level will not be subject to this gains cap, and so will deliver faster gains in respect of the very lowest funded schools.

The final national funding formula for schools therefore meets the requests outlined in the petition.

Full details on formula allocations can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-funding-formula-tables-for-schools-and-high-needs>.

These include notional school level allocations showing what each school would attract through the formula. As the Secretary of State set out in July, to provide stability for schools through the transition to the national funding formula, local authorities will continue to set their own

local formulae which will determine individual schools' budgets in their areas, in 2018-19 and 2019-20, in consultation with local schools.

HEALTH

Closure of Marske Medical Centre

The petition of residents of Marske and New Marske in the Redcar Constituency.

Declares that the decision to close the Medical Centre of Hall Close, Marske-by-the-Sea, will leave over 5,000 patients, many of whom are elderly, without a local medical practice, and require them to travel to neighbouring towns to register with a General Practitioner.

The Petitioners therefore request the House of Commons to urge the Government to prevent the closure of the Marske Medical Centre.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Anna Turley, Official Report, 25 April 2017; Vol. 624, c. 1069.]

[P002037]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine):

There is a system in place to ensure that service changes are scrutinised and challenged through formal processes. This system is based on the principle that it is right that decisions regarding local service changes are led by local clinicians, who best understand the healthcare needs of their population.

South Tees Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) closed Marske Medical Practice on 30 June after four unsuccessful attempts to find a provider for the service. The vast majority of former Marske Medical Practice patients (approximately 4,600) have now registered with another practice. There are approximately 500 patients who have yet to do so. The CCG has issued another letter to all these patients requesting them to register with another practice and provided support on how to do this.

Surrounding practices are coping with the influx of patients and have increased staffing levels to manage demand.

TRANSPORT

Continuation of local bus services in Congleton Constituency

The petition of residents of the UK,

Declares that it is the opinion of Alsager residents, shop keepers and market traders that plans to close the 315 local bus service are ill-considered, and will have a disproportionate impact on Alsager as a whole; further that the 315 service should be retained; and further that a local petition has received 201 signatures

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to support the retaining of the 315 bus service.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Fiona Bruce, Official Report, 20 July 2017; Vol. 627, c. 1097.]

[P002050]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman):

I recognise the importance of public transport for both the sustainability and independence of communities. Inadequate transport provision is a very real concern and can be a barrier to the prosperity of all.

Where there is not enough demand for a bus route to be commercially viable in its own right, all local authorities in England have powers to subsidise bus services which they consider socially necessary.

The Government provides around £250 million to support bus services in England via the Bus Service Operators Grant (BSOG), around £40 million of which goes direct to the local authorities who tender those services. Cheshire East Council's share of this is £347,000. Councils can use this money to support bus services in whatever way they see fit.

I strongly encourage local authorities and bus operators to work together, in consultation with local residents and businesses, to identify the right transport solutions that meet the economic and environmental challenges faced in the area and deliver the greatest benefits for the community.

Local Bus Services in Torbay

The petition of users of the No.65 bus service in Torbay,

Declares that the cancellation of the number 65 bus service between The Willows to Torquay via Hele, Babbacombe, Quinta, Ellacombe and St Marychurch will have a detrimental impact on local residents, in particular, elderly residents.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges Torbay Council to commit to providing a similar service to the previous No. 65 service for the sake of the local residents as soon as possible

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Kevin Foster, Official Report, 06 September 2017; Vol. 628, c. 275.]

[P002052]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman):

I recognise the importance of public transport for both the sustainability and independence of communities. Inadequate transport provision is a very real concern and can be a barrier to the prosperity of all.

Where there is not enough demand for a bus route to be commercially viable in its own right, all local authorities in England have powers to subsidise bus services which they consider socially necessary.

Decisions on subsidised bus services are a matter for individual English local authorities, in the light of their other spending priorities. We fully appreciate that local authorities are making difficult choices as a result of continuing financial pressures.

The majority of public funding for local bus services is via block grant provided to local authorities in England from the Department for Communities and Local Government. The Department for Transport also provides around £40 million of Bus Service Operators Grant funding directly to English local authorities to help deliver bus services, of which Torbay Council receives around £22,450. Councils can use this money to support bus services in whatever way they see fit.

The Bus Services Act 2017 introduced a number of new tools to help local authorities improve local bus services in their area. Through partnership arrangements we have enabled local authorities and bus operators to work more constructively together to provide better services for passengers.

I strongly encourage local authorities and bus operators to work together, in consultation with local residents and businesses, to identify local transport solutions that

meet the economic and environmental challenges faced in the area and deliver the greatest benefits for the community.

Ministerial Correction

Monday 9 October 2017

HOME DEPARTMENT

Police Pay and Funding

The following is an extract from proceedings on an urgent question on police pay and funding on 14 September 2017.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): The Metropolitan police have warned of steep increases in gun and knife crime in London over the past year: gun and knife crime have risen 42% and 24% respectively, and recorded crime is up across virtually every category, which does not chime with what the Minister is saying. Police numbers fell for the seventh consecutive year in July, and many forces are at breaking point. I do not see how asking the police to foot the £50 million bill for the Government's disingenuous pay deal will help to solve the crisis. To talk about the Mayor's precept in London is simply trying to pass on to hard-pressed Londoners the cost of the Government's failed policies.

Sarah Newton: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, which gives me the opportunity to thank the Metropolitan police for its deep and consistent engagement with my colleagues in the Home Office

working on action plans to tackle the spike in violent crime in London. We do a huge amount of joined-up work supporting our colleagues in the police force in London to tackle these issues. Taxpayers all over the country pay for policing through a combination of general taxation and local precepts. Given that the Metropolitan police consumes about a **third** of the police budget for England, I do not think it is too much to ask Londoners to pay their fair share of the precept, just as my constituents have to pay their fair share.

[Official Report, 14 September 2017, Vol. 628, c. 987-88.]

Letter of correction from Sarah Newton:

An error has been identified in an answer to the urgent question.

The correct response should have been:

Sarah Newton: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, which gives me the opportunity to thank the Metropolitan police for its deep and consistent engagement with my colleagues in the Home Office working on action plans to tackle the spike in violent crime in London. We do a huge amount of joined-up work supporting our colleagues in the police force in London to tackle these issues. Taxpayers all over the country pay for policing through a combination of general taxation and local precepts. Given that the Metropolitan police consumes about a **quarter** of the police budget for England, I do not think it is too much to ask Londoners to pay their fair share of the precept, just as my constituents have to pay their fair share.

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**not later than
Monday 16 October 2017**

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